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EVGENE
SUE

MATILDA

or the MISFORTUNES of VIRTUE

by

Eugene Sue

CHARLES DALY, 17, GREVILLE STREET,
HATTON GARDEN.

MATILDA,

PQ 2446
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1850

OR,

THE MISFORTUNES OF VIRTUE.

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH OF

M. EUGENE SUE.

BY

C. ROCHFORD, Esq.

WITH

TWENTY-ONE ILLUSTRATIONS ON STEEL,

BY

G. STANDFAST, Esq.

LONDON:
J. DALY, 17, GREVILLE STREET, HATTON GARDEN.

ADVERTISEMENT.

CUSTOM has made it necessary, in presenting a new book to the world, for the Author or Translator to say a few words as to the motives which have induced him to undertake so important a task, seeing, if it be dressed in a popular style, much will depend upon the tone of morality pervading it, as to the influence it will exercise upon the readers. With respect to the present work, the Translator feels it more requisite since many sincere and well thinking persons have come to the opinion from the perusal, or merely from the reputation, of a few vile and infamous works lately published, that all the lighter literature of France is flippant, if not vicious in its character, and immorally degrading in its principles.

Knowing from a long acquaintance with the contemporaneous literature of that country, that such an opinion is erroneous and exaggerated; and that many romances exist in that language, as pure and highly toned as any in the world, I have resolved by selecting a few of those preeminently worthy of notice, and translating them with care and accuracy, to endeavour to counteract an idea, founded on prejudice, undoubtedly, though not without a shade of truth for its basis.

It may be objected to these works, that they contain delineations of evil—pictures of guilt—and that, therefore, they are unfit to be submitted to the eyes of the innocent and pure.

But in reply to this dogma, it may be urged with confidence—that it is not the delineation of guilt in itself, but the manner and aim of that delineation, which renders the work containing it perilous or evil.

It appears to me that the fact is simply this—that, where vice is either painted as fair, seductive, fascinating, tricked out with the gaudy colours of a meretricious imagination, described in

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terms that make the young pulse beat high, the flesh quiver, and the cheek burn; or yet again, when it is represented as a natural every-day occurrence, as a matter of course, glozed over with sophistical fallacies, or excused by epigrammatic tersenesses, then there is both guilt in the writer, and danger to the reader. When, on the contrary, it is represented as in itself evil and hateful, as bringing with it present agony in the dark struggles of the inward man, and ultimate condemnation from the world without, it becomes a lesson more or less effective, as it is directed more or less strikingly to the passions and events of every-day life.

To those persons who can find both pleasure and profit in the pure and elevated fictions of Scott or James—who know that fictitious narratives often contain more real truth, than the mere skeleton outlines of history; that they dive into the individual heart of man, while the other merely glances over the movements of masses; that they preserve and embalm the memory of modes, and fashions, and costumes, overlooked by the generalizing pen of the historian—To these I offer MATILDA, by Eugene Sue, with confidence, that while it may amuse many and improve some, it can injure no one.

This novel has established the reputation of Eugene Sue as the most popular writer of the age. The tale abounds with deep, thrilling, and tragic incidents; it is a hideous but striking picture of French society, true to Nature, though clothed in rich and highly-coloured drapery. The principal male character, Lugarto, represents a Russian nobleman, who married a near relative of the Emperor Napoleon; and Matilda, the principal heroine, is the beautiful and accomplished Madame * * *. Indeed, every character in the work represent some remarkable personage well known in the Parisian circles; and the whole is an index of fashionable life and the impurities which spring from it—of society as it is, not as it should be.

MATILDA.

PART I.—YOUTH.

CHAPTER I.

THE CAFÉ LEBŒUF.

Near the close of December, 1838, there might have been seen (and probably can be at this day,) in the street St. Louis-au-Marais, a modest-looking coffee house, called the café Lebœuf. Opposite to it was the old hotel d'Orbesson, a large and solemn edifice, now used as a lodging-house, although it had been, for many generations, the residence of an ancient and noble family. The President d'Orbesson, its last proprietor, died a few months after the Restoration. In October of the same year, the bills, "To be Let," disappeared. An old porter, who had charge of the establishment, left it; and a tenant appeared as the occupant of the gloomy building, which boasted only of two stories from court-yard to garden. A large worm-eaten door, flanked by two lodges, that served as offices, opened into the street.

The hotel d'Orbesson, though now inhabited, seemed as deserted and solitary as before. The thick grass still grew over the threshold of the great door, which had never been opened since the arrival of the new tenant, Colonel Ulric. In the populous or elegant portions of Paris, you are almost entirely protected from curiosity and gossip. Every one is too much occupied with his business or his pleasures, to lose his precious time in those fabulous conjectures, that constant and ill-natured eaves-dropping, which constitute the enjoyment of country places. This exemption does not extend, however, to certain remote quarters of Paris, inhabited for the most part by men of moderate income, or retired clerks, who are peculiarly gifted with leisure and a passion for the marvellous, and always afflicted with a potent desire to know what is going on in the street or at other people's houses. This ought to be remarked in praise of these worthy cits, who are so very fond of drawing upon their imaginations—they are not very particular about the importance of the fact, upon which they love to romanticise after their own fashion. The smallest possible basis seems to prop up the most formidable stories, upon which they live happy and contented for months at a time. If the individual subjected to their scrutiny, persists in not furnishing them with the slightest pretext for scandal, if he surround himself with an impenetrable mystery, the curiosity of the idlers, baffled and suppressed, is exasperated to frenzy. To gratify their favourite passion, they proceed to almost any extremities.

During the three months while he dwelt in the Marais, Colonel Ulric had succeeded in exciting an unbounded curiosity in the breasts of his neighbours, almost all of whom were in the habit of frequenting the café Lebœuf, situated, as we have said, opposite the hotel. Nothing could be more extraordinary than the habits of the Colonel. His windows were always shut, and he never went out, unless, indeed, in a very secret manner, by a postern gate of the garden, which led into a deserted lane. His servant was a big fellow with a churlish air. Every morning a little side door was opened to receive a basket of provisions—furnished by a restaurateur in the neighbourhood—and closed immediately. Reduced to speculate upon this solitary circumstance, the gossips bribed the purveyor, and endeavoured to conjecture what were the habits and character of the Colonel by an investigation into the contents of the basket.

In spite of their inventive genius, the loungers at the café Lebœuf could not form any serious hypotheses upon this information. The Colonel appeared to live in a very simple and frugal style. Nevertheless, certain persons of a vivid imagination gave out that he might eat his chickens raw. Nothing at the time, however, was evolved from those insinuations, which did not seem to lack profundity. Last and important observation! Never had the postman brought a single letter to the hotel d'Orbesson! No one, for three whole months, had passed the threshold of his habitation. It may well be imagined that plots had been laid to elicit something from the colonel's servant, and to obtain a sly peep into the interior of the mansion. But all such attempts were futile. The neighbours, brought at last to a kind of military observation, a constant *surveillance*, fixed the centre of operations at the café Lebœuf. At the head of the gossips were the two brothers Godet, both bachelors, and formerly clerks in the Lottery Office. Ever since the arrival of the colonel, these two old boys had found an object for an existence, which till then had been vapid enough. Wild to discover the mysterious incognito, they every day formed new projects, and made new efforts to solve the living enigma of which they were so enamoured.

The Widow Lebœuf, hostess of the café, acted as an auxiliary to the two brothers. Intrenched behind her glass jars of cherries, and the silver bowls which adorned her counter, she perpetually aimed her big eyes at the door of the hotel. Astonished, as we may well be, at the perseverance of the gossips, we should recollect that vanity was a mighty spur to their curiosity. Every day they expected to develope some important facts.

It was, as we said, near the close of December. The clock of the café had just struck twelve. Madam Lebœuf, with her nose flattened against the window pane, was dividing her attention between the snow, which fell in large flakes, and the door of the hotel d'Orbesson. She was surprised that she had not seen the two brothers Godet, those faithful customers, who came every morning regularly to breakfast at her house. At last she saw them pass before the windows. They entered and disencumbered themselves of their snow-covered cloaks.

"Good gracious! Mr. Godet, senior, what is the matter with your forehead," exclaimed the widow, upon seeing a bandage round the frontal region of her customer.

Mr. Godet, senior, was a large, bald man, with a florid complexion, a protuberant corporosity, and a pompous, dogmatic countenance. Slightly lifting the black silk bandage which concealed his left eye, he replied with an indignant manner, and a bass voice, which would have done honour to a chorister in a cathedral,

"It is all owing to that monster, *Robin des Bois*,"* for thus had the gossips of the café, ingenuously christened the inhabitant of the hotel d'Orbesson.

"It is all owing to that monster, *Robin des Bois*," repeated Mr. Godet, junior, the unfailing echo of his brother.

"Good heavens! Tell me, do, directly, how it happened," said Madam Lebœuf, trembling with impatience.

"Oh, in a very simple way, my dear madam," said the former clerk of the Lottery Office. "We must have done with this adventurer, this vagabond, this vagrant, who crouches in his den like a ferocious beast. Mind! by calling him a wild beast, I do not mean to impeach his honour or morality on any point. I merely make this simple proposition—if he does no evil and never did it, why does he hide himself like a wild beast?"

After this triumphant speech, Mr. Godet, senior, again raised the bandage from his left eye.

"Yes, indeed, why should he hide himself," echoed the attentive customers.

"Now, just look at the government," bitterly resumed Mr. Godet, "it knows how to ferret out, discover, and arrest conspirators; but when the safety and tranquillity of peaceable citizens are at stake—bless my heart! there are no more city-sergeants or commissaries of police than among savages."

"Than among savages!" repeated Mr. Godet, the younger.

"In the dangerous conjuncture in which we were placed, abandoned to our resources, my dear Madam Lebœuf," resumed Mr. Godet, senior, "what did I do? What ought I to have done? 'Look here,' said I to myself; 'Godet, thou art an honest man, thou hast a great duty to perform: do what you ought, come what may, Godet! There is in thy neighbourhood a vaga-

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* Robin des Bois, (Robin of the Woods,) is the French name for the German opera of Der Freischutz. Robin is a mysterious character, who rolls about magic balls, and cuts up other shines, as one might be expected to do, who plays "the very devil."

The Stranger.

bond, an adventurer, a vagrant, who, in the face of a whole street, a whole neighbourhood, dares contumaciously to conceal himself for weeks together, nay, for whole months, without the government daring to put an end to this public scandal!'"

"It is, indeed, a scandal," said Madam Lebœuf; "it is impossible to know what our neighbours are about, if they never show themselves; one is compelled to speak ill of them."

"It is a shocking scandal," replied Mr. Godet, senior. "I not only say this—I can prove it. It is plain, it is palpable, that this scamp makes game of the opinion of his fellow citizens, by thus refusing to submit to their severe but equitable scrutiny. 'Man proposes, but God disposes.'"

Madam Lebœuf, not perceiving the aim of this philosophical quotation, and too impatient to arrive at what had occurred, exclaimed, "It is quite true, Mr. Godet—quite true—but why have you that bandage round your eye?"

"In one moment, my dear madam. Yesterday I called my brother—my worthy brother; I said to him, 'Theodore, this intolerable abuse must come to an end. We must know who this adventurer is, should it cost us our lives. I do not dissemble it,' said I to Theodore. 'It is to me a question of health. For the three months that this vagrant has abided here, and that I have been vainly endeavouring to find out who he is and what he does, I have ceased to exist. I am a prey to discomfort; I have awful dreams; abominable nightmares. I think of nothing but this mysterious stranger. It even deranges my physical functions. It gives me the dyspepsy.' Yes, my beloved madam, is is just as I have the honour to state; I confide to your sympathizing bosom the fact of a derangement of my digestive organs. 'So,' said I to myself, 'Godet, thou wilt not be such a butcher of thyself as to dig thy grave for the amusement of this adventurer. This secret drives thee to madness. Godet! well! unveil this mystery, and thou wilt deserve to regain that repose which this vagrant has so maliciously extracted.' No sooner said than done, my dear Madam Lebœuf. Yesterday, at nightfall, I borrowed a ladder of our neighbour, the carpenter; I crossed the street with Theodore; we entered the lane upon which opens the little gate of the garden of *Robin des Bois.* I placed the ladder against the wall; I mounted. It was yet light enough to see into the garden and the inside of the house."

"Well!" exclaimed Madam Lebœuf.

"Well, madam, at the moment that I was thrusting forward my head, to peer over the wall, a gun went off."

"Gracious me! a gun?" cried the widow.

"A real gun, madam; a veritable attempt upon my individual existence! My hat fell. I felt myself struck in the forehead and eye, smack! as if pierced by a thousand pins. And I heard the voice—I should know it among a thousand—the voice of the janissary, of the Seyd, of this Grand Turk, who cried out, with a ferocious and mocking tone, 'Another time, instead of small shot, you shall have a bullet: another time, you shall be shot in the head, and not in the hat!' Behold, Madam Lebœuf, how we are oppressed by the government. They have got so far as to pursue citizens to the tops of the highest walls, and shoot 'them there:' I may say, the very highest walls."

"But it is assassination!" cried the customers.

"Ah! the monster of a man!" said Madam Lebœuf. "You must go to the commissary, Mr. Godet: you must have your witnesses."

"That is just what I said to myself, as I precipitately descended to the ground, my dear Madam Lebœuf. 'Yes,' said I; 'Godet, you must bestir yourself immediately, and make your complaint to the magistrate. Now you shall see how we are governed.' A quarter of an hour afterward, I went to the commissary. Just at the moment they were lighting his lantern—his lantern, absurd emblem! if it was intended to typify the brightness of this functionary—I brought with me very irrefragable proofs; my torn hat and my forehead, all black and blue—"

"Well!'

"Well, Madam Lebœuf, the commissary told me—he had the impudence to tell me—that I had got no more than I deserved; and that, were it not for the consideration that I had lived in this quarter for twenty-two years and some months, he would be forced to prosecute me as guilty of a nocturnal attempt upon an inhabited mansion."

"Horrible!" cried Madam Lebœuf.

"Thus," resumed Godet senior, with bitter irony, and Ciceronian emphasis, "thus can an adventurer insolently dare to excite the public curiosity by hiding himself in obscurity, and an honest citizen, of good character, be shot with impunity, because he endeavours to rid himself of that perplexity, in which he is involved by his ignorance of a mystery, vital, perhaps to the public weal. Listen, Madam Lebœuf," added Mr. Godet, in an oracular tone, and an assumption of all his dignity; "a great man has said—I don't know who, but it's all the same thing—a great man has said, '*The house of every citizen should be made of glass.*' I set the example; let it be imitated. My house is of glass—a real glass jar: let people stare at it with all their might, and they will there behold me, devoted to the reform of my fellow citizens. They will—"

Mr. Godet could not terminate his philippic—an overpowering event took the words out of his mouth. A very handsome carriage, blazoned with armorial bearings, and drawn by two fine horses, stopped before the grand entrance of the hotel d'Orbesson. The carriage approached slowly; the blinds drawn up showed that it was empty. A *chasseur*, richly bedecked, dismounted from the seat where he was sitting by the coachman, who was clad in a crimson, furred pelisse. Hardly had the *chasseur* touched the knocker of the door, when, for the first time for three months, it opened to receive the carriage, and shut immediately. The gossips of the café Lebœuf, stared at it with gaping mouths. Doubtless they were on the point of delivering themselves of most extraordinary comments, when the door was again opened. The carriage rapidly departed, and in it was seen a man, seated at his ease; he was still young, and of a stalwart figure. He wore the uniform of a Hungarian hussar; white, with a blue collar, and covered with broideries of gold. Around his neck and on his breast glittered crosses and medals of foreign orders.

"Oh ho! *Robin des Bois* is a great lord from a strange country," sung out Mr. Godet senior.

"He has a handsome enough figure, but a very insolent air," said Madam Lebœuf.

"Did you see his two stars, one of gold and the other of silver?" said Mr. Godet junior.

"Ah! ha, ha! I believe, at the bottom of my heart, in spite of his title of colonel, that this adventurer, this vagrant, this vagabond, is some sort of a retired bankrupt," added Mr. Godet senior, whistling between his teeth.

"An idea, sir," cried Madam Lebœuf. "He is, maybe, an actor. I have seen, in the Olympic circus, riders dressed up after that fashion."

"But that magnificient coach," said Mr. Godet: "can that belong to the company? Besides, people don't act comedies in open day."

"I rather think," said Madam Lebœuf, "that that ugly man who lives with *Robin des Bois*, will permit you to go in, now that his master has gone out."

"You are right, my dear Madam Lebœuf," said Mr. Godet, "you are right; but under what pretext shall I introduce myself into the house?"

"You have only to say you come to make apologies for what passed last evening," timidly remarked Mr. Godet the younger.

"How! apologies! because he came near putting my eye out? You are crazy, Theodore; I shall go, on the contrary, and complain of his incivility; it will be a way to engage him in conversation."

As he said this, Godet went out and rapped at the little door in the hotel d'Orbesson. The gloomy visage of the Colonel Ulric's servant appeared at the wicket.

"What do you want?" said he.

"It is I who yesterday got—"

"You will get more still, if you come back," cried the servant, slapping the wicket in his face.

The disappointed Godet returned to his accomplices, who continued to indulge at the café Lebœuf in the most unheard-of conjectures; till their interesting conversation was arrested by the rumbling of a carriage, which stopped before the hotel d'Orbesson. The colonel re-entered his dwelling; a minute afterward the vehicle which had brought him came out and slowly rolled away. Godet followed it, and endeavoured to enter into conversation with the coachman and chasseur; but could not get one word out of them, either because they did not understand French, or because they did not choose to answer his questions. Mr. Godet and his friends concluded, from their absurd silence, that Colonel Ulric was waited upon by mutes; and this served infinitely to augment the terror which he inspired. Did this carriage belong to him? It was impossible to resolve this question.

For the next day, and the day after that, the frequenters of the café Lebœuf waited in vain for the coach. It reappeared no more. Nothing seemed to be changed in the solitary habits of *Robin des Bois*. The curiosity of the brothers Godet was yet more violently excited; since they had discovered that the Colonel was young, handsome, and doubtless in a high social position. They no longer lavished upon him the epithets of vagabond and adventurer, but contented themselves with calling him *Robin des Bois*, a cognomen which decidedly appertained to his very mysterious existence. A new fancy now perplexed the brothers Godet. It was a question with them whether or no the colonel, whom they had never seen, in the street, went out through the little gate on the lane. Two ragamuffins, set upon the watch at each end of the passage, and seeming to be intently engaged in playing at marbles, were secretly charged to observe if any one emerged from the little gate. For three days the urchins remained faithful to their posts; they saw no one. The brothers Godet, hurried onward by the demon curiosity, which was destined to impel them to many other rash enterprises, had the patience, one after the other, to lie in ambuscade for two whole days at the entrance of the lane, so as to verify the report of the ragamuffins. But they were not a whit more successful. The snow had giving place to a heavy frost, and they could not espy the trace of any footsteps. The customers of the café Lebœuf then triumphantly concluded, that if *Robin des Bois* did not go out by day, he certainly must by night. To satisfy himself on this point, Godet senior had recourse to a stratagem, which the last of the Mohegans would surely have employed to discover the traces of the mocassins of a hostile warrior.

One dark evening, the two brothers scattered before the little gate of the garden, and over the whole surface of the lane, a thick layer of ashes, and retired delighted with their ingenuity. It is impossible to describe with what anxiety, with what palpitation, they hastened the next morning at daybreak, to the lane. Their doubts were resolved. *Robin des Bois* went out at night, his footsteps on the ashes had betrayed him. Convinced of this fact, the brothers had only to renew their experiment, to assertain if the colonel's *Promenades* were frequently or seldom taken. They soon ascertained that the colonel went out every evening, whether the weather were fine or rainy. Whither could he go? People, the least inclined to be curious, would have become so under such incitements. The customers of the café Lebœuf held a council extraordinary. It was unanimously resolved, that the brothers Godet, whose courage never failed them, should, on the very first obscure night, lie in wait at the *termini* of the lane. Thus entrapped, the colonel must inevitably pass by one or the other of these inquisitors, whose duty it should be to dog him with the greatest precaution, through fear of being surprised; *Robin des Bois*—to judge from the manner in which he received attempts at scaling his walls—being not very desirious to initiate strangers into the habits of his mysterious life.

CHAPTER II.

THE LETTER.

On the morning of the expedition proposed by the two brothers, Madam Lebœuf, in her impatience, arose much earlier than was her wont; she walked backward and forward, from her counter to the door, and from her door to the counter, with inexpressible disquiet. Had the brothers Godet succeeded in their enterprize? Had they incurred any danger? As the customers one after another arrived, the general curiosity increased. One of the gossips, having reflected all night, and put together all that had been previously discovered about the colonel, had at first declared that he could be nothing more nor less than a spy of high descent. This luminous idea was victoriously refuted by an auditor, who ventured to observe, that as *Robin des Bois*, according to all appearances, went forth only at night, he would find it extremely difficult to follow so honest a trade. The dogmatical citizen responded to this objection, that the colonel deported himself thus the better to ward off suspicion—which rendered his *espionage* more dangerous still. In spite of the interest of this discussion, they were far from forgetting the two brothers, but were astonished at their protracted absence: it was mid-day, and neither the one nor the other had appeared. Madam Lebœuf called to mind the narrative of the gun; dreading some tragical catastrophe, she was about to send one of the small coffee-house boys to learn news of the Messieurs Godet, when those gentlemen entered her presence. They were greeted by a general outcry of curiosity.

"Well! well!"

"Well, we have heard fine things, responded Mr. Godet, senior, with a sinister manner.

Not until then was it perceived that the two brothers were as pale as spectres. Was this paleness owing to the fatigues of the night, or to the recollection of some great danger? Soon will Godet, the elder, disclose the awful tale. The customers of the Hotel Lebœuf formed a circle round him, and he began thus:

"I need not inform you, gentlemen, that, having courageously devoted my life to the dissipating of those mysterious shadows, which, I dare to avow it, deeply interest and affect all honest people, it—"

"Then don't talk about it," sagely remarked a bystander.

"How?" said Mr. Godet.

"Doubtless," answered the customer, "you have been writing it, 'I need not inform you, gentlemen,' and then you say the very thing—then—"

"But it is good, it is good, nevertheless," exclaimed they all, with one voice; "you talk nothing but downright nonsense, Mr. Dumont. Go on, Mr. Godet, go on; we are listening to you with all our might."

"Well, yesterday, about nightfall," continued Godet, "Theodore and myself placed ourselves in ambush at each end of the lane, fully determined to penetrate this dark mystery. The village clock struck seven—nothing; eight—nothing; nine—nothing; ten—nothing; eleven—nothing."

"What zeal! to wait so long in the cold," exclaimed the audience.

"You must have wanted a good bowl of hot wine," sighed forth Madame Lebœuf.

"I was not at all astonished," continued Godet, in a tone of authority. "No, gentlemen, no; I was not astonished at this delay. I expected it. Said I to myself, 'Godet, if something is to happen, I deem it my duty to inform you that it will take place at midnight, it is usually the hour of a certain kind of criminal enterprises, that'—but let us not anticipate. It had hardly struck twelve, when I heard a creaking, and the postern gate was unlocked."

"Ah! at last," said the audience.

"How your heart must have beat, Mr. Godet," said the seller of lemonade. "I should certainly have fainted."

"Nature having endowed me with that courage which every Frenchman possesses, I buttoned up my coat, my dear Madam Lebœuf, and prepared to follow my man. I, however, perceived a slight cold perspiration on my forehead, which I attributed to the external atmosphere. I heard *Robin des Bois*—but no, he is no longer worthy of that name; he ought to have one a thousand times more terrible. But don't let us anticipate; I heard *Robin des Bois* approach me. He had a strange and frightful footstep—a footstep that I might almost call tremulous with remorse. I held my breath, and stood close against the wall: it was so dark that he could not see me. He passed, and I then began to track his footsteps with the perseverance of a hound who pursues his prey, if I may be allowed the expression. Theodore, who had heard him come toward me, came running up, and we followed our man; or rather, our——But don't let us anticipate. We walked, and walked, and walked. Heavens! how agitated must the wretch have been, not to have perceived that we were at his heels."

"It almost makes my hair stand on end," said the widow, "when I think that he might have seen you."

"In that case, madam, I had an answer all ready; an answer which I had carefully laboured out, for the emergency of any dispute."

"What was it?"

"It was very simple: the street is free to every one!" exclaimed Godet, with a heroical air.

"How was he dressed?" asked Madam Lebœuf.

"He appeared to be clad in a black cloak and a large hat. At last, after numberless turnings, we came—guess where? Guess a hundred—a thousand—ten thousand times."

"We give it up!" exclaimed the customers of the café, with one voice.

"Have compassion on us, Mr. Godet," said the hostess.

After having for a moment enjoyed the general impatience, he exclaimed, in a sepulchral voice, "We came—ah, gentlemen!"

"But, tell us."

"We came to the burial-ground of Père la Chaise."

"Père la Chaise!" exclaimed the assembly, in accents of horror and alarm. Madam Lebœuf was so troubled that she was obliged to pour herself out a glass of wine, to recover from her emotion.

"Ah! what could he be going to do at the burial-ground of Père la Chaise?" exclaimed the widow, after having drunk.

"You will see, gentlemen, you will see it but too well. We came to the gate of the burial-ground; it was shut, of course, as it should be in a place of rest, so that the peace of every man's tomb may be undisturbed. Then our man, that is to say, *the* man—for I deny all fellowship, all community, with such a monster—the man, provided, doubtless, with a false key, picklock, or some other horrid instrument of the kind; the man, I say, opened the gate and closed it after him."

"Then what did you do?" asked Madam Lebœuf.

"I and Theodore had the courage to wait for this sacrilegious villain until four o'clock in the morning. During this interval he had, doubtless, been employing his time in horrible profanations, after the manner of the famous melodrama of the 'Vampire.'"

"A vampire!" cried Madam Lebœuf; "do you believe there are still such things as vampires in the world? How! is our opposite neighbor a vampire? A vampire! What horrible enjoyment!"

"Thank Heaven! my dear Madam Lebœuf, I am not superstitious enough to believe in such an exaggerated species of vampire as we see in the melodrama; but I believe that no one steals by night into church-yards, except from inhuman and unnatural motives, which induces me, until I can find a better name for him, to call *Robin des Bois* the VAMPIRE; and here I am irresistibly compelled to declare, that whoever does not respect the sanctuary of the sepulchre, will, sooner or later, descend into it; for Providence always punishes the guilty," added Mr. Godet, philosophically.

"There is nothing strange in that, since every one dies sooner or later," added Godet's merciless critic, in an under-tone.

Godet honored him with a ferocious glance, and concluded in these words: "When the man, whom I do not hesitate to call a vampire, had left the burying-ground of Père la Chaise, we followed him again; first, because it was on our way, and, secondly, because in the event of a bad accident, three are better than two. At last the vampire returned to the place whence he set out, and entered by the lane into what I hardly dare call his dwelling. He will, doubtless, set out again this evening, to spin out the thread of his mysterious horrors."

The story of Mr. Godet did not completely satisfy his hearers. This visit to the burial-ground, joined to the brilliant apparition of the colonel in a splendid carriage, furnished a text for inexhaustible comments to the customers of the café Lebœuf, and still further excited the general curiosity. It was true enough, that, with the exception of the widow, no one positively believed in vampires; but the singular conduct of the colonel was, nevertheless, susceptible of the strangest interpretations.

At the moment when the discussion was the liveliest, a postman entered, and gave a letter to Madam Lebœuf, who, in consideration of the severe cold, graciously condescended to pour out a glass of brandy for him, by way of recompense. This good action had an immediate reward. The postman, taking out of his box a somewhat bulky letter with a black seal, said to the widow: "The neighbor opposite is not a good customer, for I have not carried him a letter for three months; but this is worth several ordinary ones. Ha! it appears that Colonel Ulric prefers large mouthfuls to fine morsels," added the postman, with a knowing air.

"Gentlemen! gentlemen! a letter for the vampire," cried Madame Lebœuf, seizing it and lifting it above her head with an expression of triumph.

The customers ran up and gathered round the counter.

"Madam! madam!" cried the postman, who, fearing a breach of confidence, stretched forth his hand to take the letter.

"Don't be alarmed, my boy, we will not do it any harm; let us only look at the address."

"Just one look," added Mr. Godet; and seizing the letter, his hands trembling with emotion, he placed it carefully upon the marble counter.

"Another glass of brandy, my boy," said the widow to the postman; "what matters it if you do deliver this letter five minutes later, at its place of destination?"

The postman drank a second glass of brandy, without taking his eyes from the letter.

"Let us see," said the widow, "what is the address?" she read "*Mons. le Colonel Ulric*, 38 *rue St. Louis*, *Paris*."

"And the seal?—coat of arms?" "It is a spotted lozenge,"

"And the postmark?"asked another gossip.

"Paris, noon delivery, and a franc postage on account of the weight,' answered the postman. "Come now, Madam Lebœuf, as you have seen enough, I hope you will give me the letter."

"One moment my boy, you have a very blue nose to-day; drink another glass of brandy since the weather is so terribly cold."

"No, I thank you, Madam Lebœuf," said the postman; "quick, quick, my letter."

Godet and the customers looked at the wrapper with an anxiety almost amounting to ferocity; they attentively examined the thick, blue, glazed paper, and the fine delicate writing. The widow suddenly applied her broad nose to the letter, and exclaimed, "Oh, it smells of musk—what a horrible odour!"

We must, for the sake of truth, declare that the letter was strongly perfumed with *vetyver*, but to some people every perfume is musk, and musk is traditionally an abominable odour. All the noses of the customers of the café Lebœuf were applied in succession to the letter. There was but one cry—"It smells of musk."

"It is a woman's letter," exclaimed Godet, with an air of inspiration, "and a woman who uses perfume."

"Bah!" cried the widow Lebœuf with a sneer of supreme contempt.

"And who, besides, does not frank a letter of this importance—a letter of twenty cents postage?" said another customer.

"Which all signifies that she is no better than she should be, or, perhaps, worse." rejoined Madam Lebœuf, shrugging her shoulders; a creature who uses perfumes, who has not even money enough to frank her letters."

"Wait a moment," said Mr. Godet reflectingly; "this fine crow-quill hand—the number placed before the name of the street—yes, yes, this letter without doubt is from an Englishwoman."

What possible connexion could there be between a woman who used perfume, an Englishwoman, and a handsome strange colonel who never went out by day and frequented the churchyards by night? Such was the substance of the questions propounded by the company in the café, as they bent over the letter, with eyes flaming with eager curiosity. It might certainly be affirmed without judging the human race too severely, that had the gossips of the café Lebœuf been able to drown the poor postman by the force of their will, for the purpose of gaining possession of the precious letter, the messenger with the red collar would have incurred no small risk. The widow could not contain herself; she had the boldness to lift up a corner of the wrapper in order to obtain some glimpse of what it contained. The postman seized the letter, crying out that the loss of his place and imprisonment would be the consequence of such an abuse of trust. The widow, carried beyond all bounds by the demon of curiosity, held the letter firmly; and the wrapper would have been torn in the struggle had not one of the company cried out, "Gentlemen, gentlemen, here is some one else! a woman! who seems to be looking for the number of the vampire's den."

These words had the effect of magic; the widow let go the letter and glued her fat face against one of the window panes, whitened by the frost. The postman made his exit in all haste, delighted to have escaped this snare. Madam Lebœuf scratched away with her nails from one of the panes the frost which had collected, and having made an eye-hole, looked from thence into the street.

"Gentlemen, don't let us show ourselves," said Mr. Godet, "or we shall scare this woman away. Let us imitate our dear Madam Lebœuf; let each man make for himself an eye-hole; and mum's the word."

Once upon the watch, the gossips were amply repaid for their long suspense of three months; events seemed to have crowded together on that day. The postman knocked at the door and delivered up the letter to the colonel's servant, who examined the direction with a suspicious air, and appeared angry. Hardly had the postman disappeared, when the woman, already noticed by our gossips, approached the great door of the hotel; but finding no knocker there, she directed her steps to the little gate of the pavilion on the left. She was a woman somewhat advanced in years, and she appeared moved; she wore a black hat and a brown cloak, under which she concealed something. After having rung at the little gate, she paced up and down, instead of waiting for the bell to be answered, doubtless to escape observation.

The servant of the colonel appeared; the old woman, after having spoken a few hurried words, handed him a small box of tortoise-shell, incrusted with gold; and vanished after a sign of intelligence to some one whom the gossips of the café could not see. The servant looked a moment at the box with surprise and shut the gate. Mr. Godet, the widow, and their accomplices in this investigation waited with breathless impatience behind the window for the invisible person within. At last there appeared another woman. She was young, not over twenty-five years of age. Her costume was very simple; a little hat of black velvet, a pelisse of dark gray *gros de Naptes*, and a large shawl of black cashmere, which fell down to the flounces of her gown. She hid her hands in a muff of martin-skins, out of which peeped the corners of a handkerchief richly trimmed with Valencian lace; and, to crown all, the prettiest possible little feet seemed to tremble with cold in their black gaiter-boots. The most striking characteristic in the face of this young and remarkably lovely woman, was the contrast between her light flaxen hair and her large dark eyes, and strongly-marked eyelashes of the same hue. Long and luxurious curls, confined by her hat, partially veiled her cheeks. In spite of the cold, which should have heightened her colour, she was very pale, and her features wore an expression of terror. Twice she raised her beautiful eyes, suffused with tears, to heaven; and when she joined the person who waited for her, her lips parted with a sad smile and displayed teeth of the purest enamel. While passing the café Lebœuf, she hurried faster onward. Mr. Godet could contain himself no longer. He half-opened the door, and saw the two women go to a little carriage with red curtains, which was waiting at the corner of the street St. Louis. They got in and drove off with the curtains down.

"I hope—something new at last, I hope," said Godet, folding his arms and shaking his head with an air of triumph. And the customers began to recapitulate the events which had accumulated since morning.

"A letter which smells of musk."

"An old woman, who brings a tortoise-shell casket, incrusted with gold, and has a frightened look."

"And, after all a young woman who looks as if she was going to burst into tears," said Madam Lebœuf.

"Thunder! what a pretty creature!" said Mr. Godet.

"She! she a pretty woman! why, she has no more beauty than nothing at all!" said Madam Lebœuf, bridling up.

"I'll bet that is the woman who uses perfumes, and does not frank her letters," exclaimed Mr. Godet, after some moments of reflection.

"The Englishwoman! But did you not see how she was dressed, Mr. Godet?" said the widow, elevating her shoulders with an air of overpowering superiority. "She an Englishwoman! Poh! there is nothing more easy to recognize than an Englishwoman. You have only to notice the style of her dress. A straw hat, a rose-coloured spencer, a Scotch petticoat, laced boots of pale green, or lemon-colour, and, in nine cases out of ten, red hair, as in the farce of *Les Anglaises pour rire.* It is a piece which is more than a day old, and of good authority. And I say again, since the world was the world, real Englishwomen were never dressed in any other fashion."

Unfortunately, the arrival of two individuals, who suddenly entered the café, interrupted the remarks and lessons of the learned hostess upon the natural history of the Englishwomen. The company looked with reinvigourated curiosity upon the new comers, who were evidently as great strangers in the Marais as the young and lovely woman, whose portrait we have just sketched.

CHAPTER III.

INVESTIGATIONS.

THE two strangers were young and elegantly dressed. Although it was very cold, neither of them were disfigured by those abominable *sacks* which are such bad imitations of the *northwesters* of English sailors, and called *paletots* by French tailors.

The younger of the two was light-haired, of a slight and elegant figure, and wore over his dress a surtout of white broadcloth, wadded, and falling loosely about him. The large tie of his black satin cravat was fastened by a turqoise pin; his pantaloons, tight and of a blue colour, fitted neatly over his boots, shining with brilliant varnish. The elder one was dark-complexioned, and had also the exterior of a man of the world; he wore a bronze-coloured surtout, the collar and breast of which were lined with velvet. Beneath his pantaloons of light gray, appeared a handsome foot in a half-boot of black kersey-mere. A fantastic cravat of brick-red, with broad white stripes, wonderfully became his dark hair and swarthy complexion.

We give these trivial details, because they account, in some degree, for the eager and—so to speak—savage curiosity with which the two individuals were examined by the company assembled in the café Labœuf. The younger of the strangers seemed to be the prey of some overpowering emotion. As he came, he took off his hat, threw himself before a table as if quite overcome, and rested his head on his hands which were gloved in the most exquisite manner.

"The devil!" said his friend, (whom we shall call Alfred,) "the devil! Gaston, compose yourself; you are deceived, I tell you—it was not positively she."

"Was it not she?" replied Gaston, quickly raising his head, and smiling with bitterness. "Was it not she? How! Did I not recognize her at a masked ball by nothing but her gait? You wish me to deceive myself. Alfred, you take me for a child. I saw her leave her carriage and get into a blue *fiacre* with red curtains; she was with that cursed Madam Blondeau, who carried the casket."

At these words, spoken in a loud tone of voice, the customers of the café Lebœuf could not restrain a movement, expressive of delight. Mr. Godet said in an under tone to his accomplices, "Do you hear that—the casket! the casket! Doubtless, the very one which the old woman just delivered to the Vampire's servant. Bravo! the plot thickens; it is getting mighty interesting. Let us listen. Hand me a newspaper. I will adroitly insinuate myself near to these gentlemen who look like gallants of the first water." Saying this, he drew near the table, at which the young gentlemen were seated. No sooner, however, did they see they were regarded with attention, than they continued their conversation in English, to the no small disappointment of the busybodies.

"But what was this casket?" said Alfred.

"A casket that she had given to me, and which my valet was fool enough to entrust to Madam Blondeau, believing that she came from me. This morning, when I returned home, Pierre apprised me of the fine mess he had made. In my astonishment I flew to her house—she was gone. I met you on the Pont-Royal, near the pavilion of Flora, and while we were conversing, I saw her, as plainly as I now see you, get into a little blue *fiacre*, with Madam Blondeau."

"The *fiacre* departed," said Gaston, "we had scarce time to cross the bridge, while you observed the direction which it took. I ran to find a cab; I brought it, and we pursued the little *fiacre* to the entrance of Temple-street, and lost sight of it. For a full hour we hurried from street to street to find it again—it was impossible!"

"But I ask you again, what do you imagine she could have to do in the Marais, in this solitude? She does not, you told me, know a soul here. You have deceived yourself, I tell you. But suppose," continued Alfred, at a new movement of impatience from his friend, "suppose that it was she whom you saw; between ourselves, why should it occasion you so much uneasiness! You told me, yesterday, that you wished to break off this *liaison*, that your marriage—"

"Ah! certainly—yes—I wish to break it off; but I have a thousand reasons to keep on good terms with her, and it is hateful to me to be thus prevented. That casket contained her letters, and I am miserable to be so deprived of it. It was my plan never to give up those letters. I do not know what may happen."

"But how came Pierre to part with the casket?"

"Ah, that infernal Blondeau came and demanded it for me, saying that I was at her mistress's house. Pierre has seen Bloudeau bring me letters a hundred times; he suspected nothing; he believed her."

"*She* knew, then, that the letters were kept in the casket?"

"Yes, she gave it to me herself for that purpose. I had the key and the secret to it. It was in a bureau in my bedchamber, which I never locked; and I have entire confidence in Pierre."

"But, my dear Gaston, there seems to me something very incomprehensible in all this. Instead of carrying off this casket, nobody knows where, why may she not be taking very good care of it at her own house?"

"She would not dare to do so."

"She would not dare! I hope it is not the jealousy of her husband that frightens her," said Alfred, smiling in spite of himself.

"I cannot tell you any more about it," said Gaston, appearing very much embarrassed, and blushing deeply; "but she has reasons to think this casket is safer anywhere else than in her house."

Alfred regarded Gaston with astonishment. "That alters the case," said he; "then I believe you; but, at the worst, these are only letters returned involuntarily, and I do not see—"

"No, it is not all! for you must know that, besides these letters, there were notes from me and from another woman, on the subject of this affair. Yes, indeed; a challenge, a most exaggerated piece of gallantry—I know not by what foolish exercise of the worst possible taste, I unhappily allowed myself to be hurried into an act I now abjure. For if she desires—and I confess I have behaved badly enough to cause her to wish it—she can do me a dreadful injury. I know her wit and the force of her will; you know her influence in society. Ah! Alfred, with all my pretensions to adroitness, I have behaved like a school boy, like a dolt, and am now at her mercy."

"Come, come, my dear Gaston, it is quite sufficient to suffer remorse when it comes without anticipating it. No more exaggerations; you are in the wrong with regard to your conduct toward her, you say; but that is not the question. The question is, to find out whether this bad behaviour can injure you. Well, I do not think it can. She is said to be generous and proud; you yourself were, at one time, not silent concerning the qualities of her heart; you once maintained that she was incapable of a dark or perfidious action."

"Ah! you know as well as I do, that such characters, when they suffer wrong, become irritated, and revenge perfidies in the most cruel manner. For two years I have not had the slightest pretext for complaint against her; and, nevertheless, I have given her many causes of jealousy; but she is one of those singular characters who drink their own tears, and receive you always with a serene face. This is often wounding to our self-love; but, with this exception, I again affirm that I have nothing to reproach her with. If you had not proposed to me this marriage, which would make my fortune amount to one hundred and fifty thousand francs income, without counting expectations, I should have continued this *liaison*, if not as a very exciting pleasure, at least as an agreeable habit. And then, there was nothing irksome in our intercourse—it suited me. After all, we know what we abandon, but do not know what we shall find."

"All this, dear Gaston, is admirably reasoned—it is the quintessence of egotism; your whole conduct, up to this time, is redolent of the perfume of self-love; do not allow yourself to be distracted by vain fears. You wish to break off the affair? Well, the taking away of that casket is a strong pretext for quarrelling. With regard to the notes, as you call them, which she may find there, a woman in her position, who respects herself so much, does not hazard a revenge which might ruin her reputation, and subject herself to the charge of having sacrificed herself to— I do not ask to whom—no matter. Once again, Gaston, believe me—it is all for the best."

"Ah!" cried he, after a moment of silence, as if struck with a sudden thought, "she is, perhaps, only gone to the bank of the river to throw the casket into the water."

"You are mad, Alfred. She would have burnt the letters at home, and all would have been hushed up. Again, I say, she keeps them for a malicious purpose."

"A malicious purpose!" said Alfred, impatiently shrugging his shoulders. "After all, what do these letters prove? That you have not behaved well toward her? that you have sacrificed her? Why, who the devil ever takes the part of a woman who has been sacrificed? Heap upon a woman of society the most odious ill-usage; treat her publicly with the most atrocious cruelty; her intimate friends will noise abroad everywhere, that the wretch has received no more than she deserved; and the men will envy your insolent brutality, as a pickpocket envies a highwayman."

"I tell you that you do not know her," replied Gaston.

Seeing the paleness and agitation of his friend, Alfred said to him in French, "Come, Gaston, compose yourself; we only came into this abominable shop to rest ourselves and drink a glass of water."

"You are right," said Gaston, looking round, "everything is so dirty here, it seems impossible to obtain even a tolerable glass of water."

This uncivil expression increased the anger of Madam Lebœuf, and of her customers, who were already furious, at not being able to understand the two young men, since they had been speaking in English.

Madam, a glass of sugar and water, if you please," said Gaston to the widow.

The latter, without replying, majestically rung a cracked bell, and cried with a shrill voice.

"Boitard! Boitard! a glass of sugar and water."

"What a frightful odour of frying-pan!" said Gaston, resting his head on his hand; "it is insupportable!"

"And, besides that, what a frightful combination of mould and old clothes the place is infested with!" continued Alfred.

"But, madam, I asked for a glass of water, impatiently exclaimed Gaston.

"But, sir, it seems to me that I rang for Boitard loud enough!" sharply responded the widow, as she again sounded the bell.

"Verily, it is true, Gaston. Madam has rung for Boitard," said Alfred, with much seriousness; have a little patience. But, by way of fortifying myself against the presence of Boitard, I will, as a precautionary measure, light a cigar."

Alfred took a cigar from a beautiful little case made of Lima straw, lighted it with an *allumette*, from a small damasked silver box, and began to smoke. The company in the café were stupified. They knew not how to look upon this audacious innovation. Some coughed; others gave way to certain energetic "hems!" Doubtless, had it not been for the curiosity, which these young gentlemen had excited, from the part which they played in the adventure of the casket, the widow and her partisans would have protested against this display of tap-room manners.

At that moment appeared Boitard, a chubby-cheeked boy, with naked arms, to whom all days of the year were dog days. Upon a scaly plate he bore a decanter, a glass of two thumbs' thickness, and five pieces of sugar in a cracked saucer.

While Gaston appeared to yield himself to the deepest reflections, Alfred, who, with both his hands in his pockets, regarded the decanter of water with a fierceness, qualified by disgust, suddenly cried out—

"Boitard! my dear, there is a spider in your decanter. That is more than we asked for. We are in haste. We should like a simple glass of water without a spider, if it be a possible thing."

Boitard passed his big, red fingers through his hair, scratched his head, looked attentively into the decanter, and actually descried the spider. Instead of being overcome by the discovery, he shrugged his shoulders, as he turned himself sideways toward the widow and her customers—a movement which seemed to say, "The gentleman seems to be displeased with his spider." To which the widow and her customers responded by another pantomine, signifying almost, "Ah! good heavens! Don't speak, Boitard! it would be a pity!"

Boitard, then, once more shrugging his shoulders, took the decanter in his hand; after several fruitless efforts, he inserted his big, abominable digit into the neck, and began fishing after a new fashion. This piscatory enterprise was crowned with perfect success. Boitard drew forth the spider; took it delicately between his thumb and forefinger; crushed it under his foot; replaced, with imperturbable coolness, the decanter upon the table, and said to Alfred, as if he were correcting the caprice of a spoiled child,

"Well, sir, I hope that you will not say there are any spiders in the water now!"

Alfred had contemplated the manœuvres of Boitard with a profound admiration. These last words struck him as sublime. He placed a hundred sous piece in the boy's hand, and said to him, "That is for you; every perfection has its price; and, in your way, you are, my dear—you are magnificently dirty."

Boitard looked, by turns, at Alfred, the money, the widow, and the customers, with an air of stupid wonder. Gaston, still plunged in reverie, said, in an under tone, talking to himself, "What to do? What to do? that is the question. Where can that casket be at this moment?" And he advanced his hand mechanically toward the decanter.

"The devil! Don't touch that, Gaston," said Alfred, and he related the fishing for the spider. Gaston pushed away the plate in horror, and impatiently exclaimed, "Let us go; we cannot even drink a glass of water here—my throat is burning, my head is on fire. Come, let us try to discover some place less repulsive."

These words caused the wrath of the widow to boil over; and she cried out, addressing herself to Alfred, with great indignation, "I'd have you to know, sir, people don't smoke here as if they were in an ale-house; do you hear? And, moreover, sir, I am happy to say to you, in spite of your sneers, that if you do not choose to drink what you are served with here, you have no business to try to disgust other people."

Alfred replied with a serious imperturbability, "I assure you, madam, that I have not abused my influence with this gentleman; I declare to you, that when he reflects solemnly upon what he is about, and exercises his own judgment, he never eats spiders."

"Come, this woman is ridiculous," said Gaston, throwing a louis upon the counter. The widow fiercely pushed back the golden piece, and asseverated, that in her establishment people never paid for what they had not consumed,

"I have paid this funny fellow for his spider," said Alfred to Gaston. The latter took his louis and the young gentlemen departed. Hardly had they shut the door of the café, when Mr. Godet followed bareheaded, notwithstanding the cold.

"Your hat, Mr. Godet," said the widow, who guessed the intentions of her customer. "My hat!" said Mr. Godet, "I hav'nt the least need of it. I am a going this moment to bring them back, tied together feet and fists like sheep—the beautiful coxcombs!"

In two strides he overtook the young gentlemen, and slightly touched the sleeve of Alfred, who inspired him with the most confidence.

"What do you want, sir?" said the latter, astonished at the grotesque figure of the customer.

"I desire, sir, to do you an immense service, if I am able to do so—for good citizens should aid one another. I propose that we enter into a league against our common enemy. Now, our common enemy, at this juncture, is *Robin des Bois*, otherwise called the Vampire."

Alfred and Gaston stared at Mr. Godet, without understanding a word of his strange language. At length Gaston said to Alfred, "Come, my friend; don't you see that these people are crazy?"

"This fellow looks more like a fool than a madman."

Mr. Godet, fearing least he should lose his prey, did not notice the observation, but added quickly, with a mysterious air:

"I know everything; you are looking for a young lady, who was in a little blue fiacre with red curtains, accompanied by an older woman. Black hat, brown mantle, grey hair: that is a description of the old one. Light hair, eyebrows and eyes black: that is a description of the young one."

"It is they!" cried Gaston, throwing off his indifference, and addressing Mr. Godet, who exulted with a malignant joy: "Indeed, sir, I am interested to learn where those persons have gone, of whom you speak."

"And more than all, to know where they carried the little shell casket, covered with gold; is it not so, sir?" rejoined Mr. Godet.

"How came you aware of that?" said Gaston, more and more surprised.

"I can assure you, upon my honor, that the old woman in question, about an hour ago, before my eyes, gave the casket to the Vampire's servant," said Mr. Godet.

This news was so unexpected, so surprising, that the two young gentlemen could not believe it. A thousand opposing emotions, disquiet, anger, jealousy, vengeance and curiosity, agitated the mind of Gaston.

"Sir," cried he, growing pale, "you must disclose to me instantly, who is the person whom you have surnamed the Vampire, and where is his dwelling?"

"Thunder! you are not displeased, my dear friend," said Godet, who was by no means disposed thus early to abandon his victims; "I beg you to observe, gentlemen," shewing his bald head—"I beg you to observe that I am no longer in the spring-time of my years. If you will be so good as to enter the café Lebœuf, we can there converse without freezing."

"As you please, sir," said Gaston, impatiently retracing his steps toward the café.

Never did a Roman conqueror, bringing bound at his chariot-wheels the slaves of his victories, feel greater exultation than did Mr. Godet, when he re-entered the café attended by the two young gentlemen.

He made a sign to the customers, so as to appease their curiosity, and ensconced himself in a corner of the café. Mr. Godet took very good care not to come directly to the point, touching the name of the colonel. Notwithstanding their impatience, he forced them to listen to all the absurd stories forged by the oldest customers of the café Labœuf.

Without the precise and self-evident fact, which this absurd gossip had already revealed, Gaston would not have given the slightest credence to his words. He was compelled to listen to the story of the gunshot, the carriage, magnificently harnessed, the colonel's uniform, and, also, of the sacrilegious vigils in the cemetery of Père la Chaise. In the midst of all this nonsense the young gentlemen were struck with the strange habits of the colonel.

"Sir," said Gaston, "I, for the last and twentieth time, ask you to do me the favor to inform me where this gentleman lives. All these details are doubtless exceedingly curious; but, again I ask you the address of the colonel: give me his address."

"Follow me, gentlemen," said Godet, suddenly getting up, with an imposing air.

He opened the door of the café, protuded his finger, shewed Gaston the little door of the hotel d'Orbesson, and said to him: "There, sir—the dwelling of the Vampire is right before you: behold the wicket."

Gaston ran across the street without speaking a word. Godet shut the door of the café and exclaimed, rubbing his hands together with great glee and a diabolical satisfaction,

"It grows warm, gentlemen! it grows warm? Now to our stations—to our stations!"

Gaston rang the bell violently. The face of the colonel's old domestic appeared, not at the door, but at the wicket. The two young gentlemen seemed to make the most pressing demands to be admitted: to beg—to threaten, even: all was in vain. All Gaston could do was to hand his card through the wicket, upon which he had hastily pencilled a few words. Perceiving that the two young gentlemen spoke with warmth, Mr. Godet partially opened the door of the café, and distinctly heard Gaston say, in an enraged tone, "To-morrow morning, at nine o'clock: there will then be no excuses, I hope."

The two young gentlemen disappeared, marching off with rapid strides.

CHAPTER IV.

THE RENDEZVOUS.

On the following morning, at nine o'clock, Gaston's carriage drew up before the Hotel d'Orbesson. The valet rang, the small door opened, and the old servant appeared.

Gaston and Alfred left the vehicle.

"Is Colonel Ulric at home?" said Gaston.

The servant bowed without replying, and preceded the two young men, as they entered the house.

Nothing could be sadder or more desolate than the interior of this vast mansion. Several large slabs, in a state of dilapidation, were lying here and there, under the grass in the court. One would have thought they were the sepulchral stones of an abandoned cemetery. All the windows were shut on the outside; the glass door of the vestibule creaked upon its rusty hinges, and made the sonorous arches of the grand staircase echo mournfully.

The colonel occupied the ground-floor. The servant conducted the two young men into an immense drawing-room, scarcely half-furnished; its lofty windows, without curtains, and with diamond panes, opened upon a garden surrounded by high walls, gloomy as the garden of a cloister.

"The colonel will be here immediately," said the servant, disappearing as he made the announcement.

The day was dark and disagreeable. The wind came moaning sadly through the half-closed doors. All within this dwelling showed, not misery, not carelessness, but perfect indifference with regard to appearances.

Alfred and Gaston looked at one another for some time in silence.

"Since we have entered," said Alfred, shivering with cold, "it seems as though my shoulders were loaded with a mantle of frozen lead. There is no fire anywhere. This man must be a genuine Spartan."

"This man! Who is he?" said Gaston, speaking to himself in an undertone.

"She alone will be able to explain to you; but she is to depart this evening, I believe."

"This evening?" replied Gaston.

"Ulric?" said Alfred; "Ulric? that must be a Russian name, or, perhaps, a Prussian, or a German one. I went yesterday to the Union Club, hoping to meet there several members of the diplomatic body: in short, I saw there three or four secretaries of legation, or of the embassy. But none knew Colonel Ulric. We have no other way of clearing up the difficulty, than by means of the Russian embassador. But I have not been able to meet him."

"After all, what does it matter?" said Gaston. "This man has my secret; she has, without doubt, sacrificed me for his sake. This is unworthy conduct—it is treacherous. I will either kill him, or he shall kill me."

"Do not go to work so rashly, my friend; perhaps the silly person whom we saw yesterday, may be the cause of the evil. Doubtless, all the appearances tend to the conclusion that she brought the casket here. But, mark well, that she is not within. It was Madam Blondeau who brought it to the servant. In short, Gaston, I tell you you have too much acquaintance with the ways of the world, and affairs of this sort, to be led like a child: this is a matter of grave importance. Our best course is to accommodate our conduct to the circumstances which may follow."

"What enrages me," cried Gaston, "is the infidelity of this woman. I believed her incapable, not only of a lie, but even of the slightest dissimulation. Never did she even mention, in my presence, the name of this man; and it is in him she has confided. There is in this an odious mystery, which I haste to penetrate."

"All that this babbler mentioned yesterday, concerning the colonel's life, is *so* strange," said Alfred—"it is obvious that he is, at least, very eccentric. This miserable place does not by any means indicate the presence of joviality; but for your sad presentiments, I should be delighted to find myself face to face with *Robin des Bois*—with the Vampire, as the good people call him. But how cold! how cold! If this is the devil, he ought at least to have some regard for those who come to see him, and cast into this place a reflection from his infernal roasting-jack."

At this moment the servant opened a door, and the colonel entered.

He was a man of lofty bearing, and very plainly dressed. His age appeared to be about thirty-six, although his brown hair had begun to be slightly gray over the temples. His complexion was tawny; the wrinkle, which separated his black eyebrows, strong, straight and distinct, gave him a stern and haughty appearance; although his features, otherwise very regular, might at an earlier age have had a much milder expression. He held in his hand Gaston's card; casting his eyes upon it, he said in a firm voice, and without any foreign accent, directing his inquiry at once to both the young gentlemen,

"Count Gaston de Senneville?"

"Is I, sir," said Gaston; then pointing to his friend, he added, "the Marquis de Baudricourt."

The colonel again made a slight motion of his head, which he intended to serve as a bow. Looking Gaston steadily in the face, and crossing his hands behind his back, he seemed to expect that he would explain the object of his visit.

In spite of his confidence—in spite of his acquaintance with the world, Gaston was for a moment disconcerted. The stern and bronzed features of the colonel showed no signs of emotion; one would have supposed he wore a brazen mask. His large gray eyes had a clear, fixed, penetrating look, which, after a while, became insupportable.

Nothing is more difficult than to break silence of a certain kind. Whether Alfred waited until Gaston should speak, or Gaston waited until the colonel should speak, all three remained silent for several minutes. It was only then that Gaston perceived how difficult it would be to explain the object of his visit without involving the woman of whom he believed he had reason to complain.

Thus it often happens: at the moment when he came to explain what he wanted, Gaston was assailed by a thousand reflections concerning what he ought to have done before presenting himself at the house of the colonel. Embarrassment, vexation, anger, sent up the blood to his forehead. Alfred, wishing to close so awkward a scene, said to the colonel,

"Sir, you are doubtless aware of the object of our visit?"

"No, sir," said Ulric.

"It refers, sir, to a box which belongs to me," cried Gaston, "and which was brought to you yesterday by a woman whom you must know; for she is the emissary of another woman, who certainly has the honor of your acquaintance."

"I cannot understand what you mean to say, sir," said the colonel.

"Sir!" said Gaston quickly.

"Sir!" said the colonel, without changing his tone.

There was a new silence; Gaston bit his lips with mortification.

Alfred coolly replied,

"Mr. de Senneville has a great interest, sir, in ascertaining whether a box, that belongs to him, and contains some very important papers, was brought to you yesterday in the afternoon. If you are disposed, sir, to give him your word of honor that the box neither is nor has been in your possession, Mr. de Senneville will be satisfied."

"I shall declare myself satisfied only if—"

"My friend, you have hitherto been disposed to take my advice," said Alfred; permit me, then, to explain to the gentleman."

"The explanation will be very simple, gentlemen," said the colonel, taking several steps toward the door, to show that all further inquiries would be vain; "I have no reply to make."

"So, sir," cried Gaston, "you refuse to give me your word that———"

"I refuse, sir, to reply to questions, of which I do not admit the propriety," said the colonel; and he continued to advance toward the door.

Gaston and Alfred remained near the window.

"Sir," said Alfred, scarcely containing himself; "does your movement toward the door signify that this conversation touches you too keenly?"

"*Too* keenly? Perhaps not," said the colonel, putting his hand upon the lock, "but certainly with *sufficient* keenness. I have nothing further to say or to hear."

"And, for my part, I declare to you, sir, that I shall not leave this place until you have replied," cried Gaston. "Is this box here, or is it not?"

"One word, sir, I pray you," said Alfred, who seemed to exhaust all means of conciliating him, "You are a man of the world, sir; and we who address you are men of the world. We are resolved to procure certain information. The information which we have already procured, satisfies us that the box, about which we are anxious, has been sent, if not to you, sir, at least to one of your people. If you are ignorant of this circumstance, will you oblige us by inquiring of your servant?"

"That is of no use, sir."

"But, then," said Gaston, stamping his foot with violence; "you must———"

"Gaston, one word more," said Alfred; and he added, "Then you refuse us this explanation, sir. You alone remain responsible for the matter in question. We appeal for the last time to your honor, to obtain from you a positive reply. Mr. de Senneville will regret to go beyond the bounds of moderation; and you belong, sir, to too good society, not to treat politely a demand which has been politely made."

"I have already had the honor of telling you twice, gentlemen, that I have no answer to give on this subject," replied the colonel, still calm and cool as ever.

Alfred and Gaston looked at one another with indignation.

"It is evident, sir," said Alfred, "that we cannot force you to speak and to explain, but——"

"It is useless to prolong this interview, sir," said Gaston, firmly; "to refuse a reply is to confess that you have the box in your possession. I have reasons for regarding this as an insult; and I demand satisfaction."

"Very well, sir," said the colonel, opening the door of the drawing-room.

"This gentleman will come during the day and make the necessary arrangements," said Gaston, motioning toward Alfred.

"It will be useless, sir; we can now choose the hour, the place, the arms," said the colonel.

"Well, sir, the hour——to-morrow morning, at six," said Gaston.

"At ten o'clock," said the colonel.

"In the forest of Vincennes, near the pheasantry."

"In the forest of Vincennes," said the colonel.

"With regard to the arms," said Gaston; "choose, sir."

"It is indifferent to me."

"The sword, then, sir."

"The sword, then!" said the colonel, shutting the door upon the two young men, without permitting either his gestures or his voice to betray the least emotion.

The old servant reconducted the visitors to the door; and d'Orbesson's hotel became once more silent and solitary.

The customers of the café Lebœuf, on the watch since morning, had seen the two young men enter. When the latter went out to regain their carriage, Mr. Godet, moved by his invincible curiosity, opened the door of the café, stretched his bare head toward Gaston, and said to him, with a mysterious and yet familiar air:

"Well, young man, you, who have been in the Capharnaüm of the Vampire, can describe to us how the inside of his cave looks. Has he given you back the pretty lady's casket? I hope you have reprimanded him soundly, and conferred upon him more 'kicks than halfpence.'"

Alfred and Gaston entered their carriage without replying to Mr. Godet's questions. The valet shut the door, calling to the coachman—"To the hotel!" and the loiterers remained behind, disappointed.

"Impertinent puppy!" said Mr. Godet. "You were rather more polite yesterday, when it was important to procure my secret from me. No matter; they were pale; they looked vexed; 'tis always so."

Re-entering the café, Mr. Godet was assailed with many inquiries. He assumed an air of importance, and replied:

"These gentlemen have only had time to give me a few of the details, and thank me for my services. To-morrow morning the whole will be cleared up."

This announcement, which happened by chance to turn out true, was most acceptable to the loiterers; they waited for the morrow with impatience. This day was indeed destined to be a great day for the prying ones of the café Lebœuf.

At eight o'clock the colonel's servant went out alone. He returned about an hour after in a cab, bringing with him two foot soldiers.

"Whew!" exclaimed Mr. Godet, already at his post of observation. "He went for the guard. It is perhaps to defend his master against the two young men. It appears that the Vampire is not a skeleton."

"If this were the guard," observed some one, "the soldiers would have their guns and their cartridge-boxes, whereas they have only their sabres.

"True; but then, what is the object of procuring soldiers at all, if not to lend armed aid to the Vampire?"

The discussion was in progress when the door of the hotel opened; the colonel went out, wrapped in a large cloak, and got into the cab with the soldiers. The vehicle drove off; the old servant, instead of re-entering the house according to custom, stood for some moments in the doorway, casting uneasy glances in the direction of the vehicle. He then retired, shutting the door roughly.

These movements did not escape the spies of the café Lebœuf; they did not comprehend any part of the colonel's conduct. Where could he have gone in company with these two soldiers? The widow observed, that she believed she had seen something like the scabbard of a sword projecting from under the colonel's cloak; but she dared not affirm it positively.

"How! a sword? wait now, wait," said Mr. Godet, rubbing his hands joyously; "you are right; he is perhaps to have a duel with these two puppies, to whom I spoke yesterday. Why, this becomes very amusing; we shall have some fun for our money: bravo!"

"If they have had a duel," cried the spiteful widow, "I would bet almost everything in my pocket, that the sneering fellow who made such a fuss about a miserable spider, has been roughly handled by——no matter whom."

"Having never received the least politeness or expression of gratitude from these fops, I shall join you in annoying them, my dear Madam Lebœuf, by every means in my power."

"However, if there has been a duel, there must have been witnesses."

"Eh! the soldiers?"

"Come, then, my dear Madam Lebœuf, the Vampire is a colonel; he would not take for seconds two private skirmishers. It would be contrary to all the rules of discipline."

"Ah! there! what makes this servant come to the door so often?" added Mr. Godet, looking through the window. "Since his master went away, he has planted himself in that spot three times. This is not natural; he is annoyed about something; he has a disturbed manner. Suppose I go and interrogate him?"

"The moment would be ill-chosen, Mr. Godet," said the widow; "do not expose yourself to the abuse of this miserable old creature."

"Silence! silence! I hear the sound of a carriage," said Mr. Godet, again squeezing himself close up to the window.

In fact, the cab returned with the two soldiers and the colonel. The latter leaped nimbly from the vehicle, said a few words to the soldiers, shook hands with them, and dismissed them. Madam Lebœuf affirmed that she saw a tear start from the eyes of the old servant, when he shut the small door of the hotel after his master.

Unhappily for the loiterers of the café Lebœuf, these two days, so fruitful in events, were succeeded by others desperately monotonous. They saw no more letters arrive—no box—no carriage. Every morning the purveyor brought the usual provisions, but nothing further occured.

The ashes, often renewed in the court-yard, gave satisfactory proof that the Vampire continued his nocturnal rounds. Although Mr. Godet no longer evinced any desire to accompany him in person, yet he had no doubt but his visits were always directed towards the Père la Chaise. The only circumstance which occured to gratify the curiosity of the loiterers was, the appearance of the aged woman who brought the box. About two months after the colonel's duel, this woman returned to d' Orbesson's hotel, and handed a very bulky package to the colonel's servant.

She never afterwards was seen there.

We shall now give some account of this last visit of Madam Blondeau to Colonel Ulric.

CHAPTER V.

COLONEL ULRIC.

THE old servant ushered Madam Blondeau into the grand saloon, where two months before, the colonel had received Gaston and Alfred. The physiogomy of Stok, for such was the name of the old servant, had lost its crabbed expression.

"And how is the colonel, Mr. Stok?"

"Always the same, Madam Blondeau; his body is iron, but his head is water; sometimes the colonel passes whole days crying like a child. For him to cry—him—if anybody had told me this a year ago, do you see, I should not have believed it. And then, almost every night—" and Stok sighed.

"Always to the cemetery—just heaven?"

"Always, Madam Blondeau: it is enough to rend the heart—"

"And the rest of the time, Mr. Stok?"

"He is awake, he despairs; he walks to and fro in the little paved chamber that he occupies. It is a hundred times colder and damper than the others; for it is the antechamber of the bath. Well! they say that he has chosen it on purpose, because it is the worst in the hotel. But, Madam Blondeau, there is something which looks like childishness; and, for all that, tears come into my eyes when I see it."

"What is it, Mr. Stok?"

"For the six months that we have lived in this house, my master has, by constantly walking in his little chamber, from the door to the window and from the window to the door, for ever on the same place, fairly worn away the floor with his footsteps."

"Ah! indeed! this is horrible! What a life! Good Heaven!"

"Alas! Madam Blondeau, they say his mind is so firmly set upon one thing that he cares for nothing else, not even cold and hunger. If I did not remind him of the hours for meals, he never would think of eating. During the most severe frosts of winter, he will never have any fire. I can't understand such caprice. Moreover, I can tell you one thing which will astonish you, Madam Blondeau. For thirty years past, every day, my master permits me, according to an old Hungarian custom, just before I leave him, to kiss his hand. We think this a mark of attachment and respect. Well, in spite of the bitter cold, his poor hand is dry and hot as if burnt up with fever. In spite of all this, he is no worse—he has such an iron constitution. In our campaigns against the Turks, twelve years ago, I have seen him on horseback for twenty and thirty hours at a time, without eating, and he took nothing all the while but a little snow which fell upon his horse's mane, to quench his thirst, and he never complained. If he was wounded, he would smile, but with a smile so soft, so sweet, that, in spite of my fears, I felt happy again. Alas! for one whole year this smile has not brightened his lips. He sees nobody—visits nobody. Only once he went out, and that was to the Russian embassy, to receive an order from his majesty the emperor. Ah! Madam Blondeau, it was a treat to me to see him in his uniform. He was so handsome with it on, and it reminded me of so many things. I was surprised when he told me to bring him his uniform. 'I am going,' he said 'to the embassy, to receive a letter from the emperor;' and I understood from that, that he thought it more respectful to go in his uniform. The emperor has always been so good to him, and the colonel loved him so much. From that day to this he has never gone out, except to this duel."

"Ah! that duel! that duel! When I think, Mr. Stok, that this unhappy casket was the cause of it!"

"I was not, Madam Blondeau, downright miserable, because I knew the skill and strength of my master. He has fought with the most famous French masters of fence who ever came into Russia. However, I could not prevent myself from going and looking out at the door; and when I saw him enter with two soldiers, whom he had sent me for to the barrack to be witnesses of what took place, my poor old heart bounded with joy. The young man got off with a sword-thrust, which kept him a month in his bed. The evening of the duel, my master said a few words that much surprised me as coming from him; he was talking to himself, as he often does; and he muttered in a low voice, 'I do not hate this man; except in the strife of battle, the sight of blood has always made me shudder, and yet I have seen my own gush forth with a ferocious joy. I was about to give up the play of simply keeping him off, when a *voice* bade me to spare his life, and I obeyed.'"

"What voice, Mr. Stok?"

"I don't know, Madam Blondeau. Sometimes when he is walking to and fro, he stops all of a sudden—seems to listen—presses his hands to his forehead, and walks again."

"Poor colonel!"

"But what an egotist I am, to talk to you about nothing but my master!" said Stok; "and how is the viscountess?"

"Madam always remains at Touraine. She suffers much."

"Ah! madam Blondeau, during the six years that we have known one another, what changes have taken place! what misfortunes!"

"God grant that there may be an end come to them for my mistress, Mr. Stok. I dare not offer up the same prayer for your master; but they say that every sorrow has its conclusion."

"Not such as these, Madam Blondeau; not such as these," sadly observed Stok, bending down his head.

"Can I not yet see the colonel? I wish to deliver this packet to him, and to return this evening by the Touraine coach. I must hasten back to my mistress."

"My master has not yet rung for me. A few moments, more or less, cannot be of much consequence," said Stok, in an almost supplicating tone. "Oh! if you could but know how important to my master are a few minutes of sound sleep! It does him so much good! He sleeps so little! He came home again this morning very late."

"What a life!" said Madam Blondeau, sighing.

"I would not complain," continued Stok, "if I had to think only of my master; but you cant imagine the annoyance that I suffer from half-a-dozen old imbecile people, who are every day prying into our affairs. There are no tricks which they have not tried to get in here, they are continually perched like crows on the chairs of the café opposite, to spy out what we are doing."

"They are the same, I dare say, who appeared to be on the watch the moment I knocked at the door," said Madam Blondeau.

"The very same! However, I gave one of them a good lesson. Nothing could have—"

At this instant a bell rang.

"My master calls. Wait for me, I beg of you, Madam Blondeau. I will go and inform my master of your arrival." A quarter of an hour afterward, Madam Blondeau entered the colonel's chamber. The colonel was standing up, clad in a long Turkish dressing-gown, of a dark color. The low window, athwart which could be seen a row of chesnut trees, with black and barren trunks, cast a doubtful light into the apartment. The kind of mournful contraction, which imparted to the face of the colonel a hard and almost petrified expression, appeared to relax a little when he saw Madam Blondeau; his looks grew milder.

"How is Matilda?" said he, with an accent full of sorrow and kindness.

"Alas! sir, madam is always depressed." And the voice of the poor old woman faltered, and tears filled her eyes. "Pardon me, sir," said she, "I cannot hear that name pronounced without emotion."

"I call her thus before you by her maiden name, because you brought her up, and have ever treated her with the devotion of a mother."

"Ah! sir, I do not deserve this: I am only a servant."

"To speak so, is to do justice neither to her nor to you. I know what your conduct has been. I also know, that Matilda appreciates it as she ought, good and excellent woman that you are. But what have you come for?"

"Madame wished me to bring you these papers, being unwilling to trust them to the post-office. She also ordered me to say, sir, that she asks no reply. You may read this when you please, she said; she knows——"

"Well—well!" said the colonel, mildly, as if anxious to banish a painful recollection, and he placed the package on the table.

"And the casket?" he exclaimed, inquiringly.

"Madame requests you still to retain it under your care.

In spite of the very kind reception which Madame Blondeau met with from the colonel, it was evident that he labored under the weight of deep anxiety; scarcely had he pronounced these last words when he fell into a revery. Folding his arms upon his breast, he bowed his head, and began to walk slowly up and down the room, forgetting the presence of Madam Blondeau; the latter, not daring to utter a single word, soon withdrew.

The following letter was appended to a voluminous manuscript, which Madam Blondeau brought from Matilda to the colonel.

CHATEAU DE MARAN.
13th April, 1838.

I know not, my friend, if, after so long an absence, you will have courage to open this letter.

I knew, I loved, oh! I dearly loved, her whom you mourn: I knew your heart, your character: I knew what you were to her; I knew what she was to you. How could I help feeling that your despair might be for ever incurable?

Ulric, my friend, my brother; you have not a heart on earth more devoted than mine. I have never had any other friend than you. If I had oftener listened to the severe and inflexible voice of your holy friendship, what bitter regrets should I have avoided! But let me not speak of myself, but of you—of you, with your great and noble heart; of you, the personification of human goodness.

You suffer, you suffer, my friend, from a hopeless grief! The farther you plunge into this abyss, the deeper it grows, the more profound the darkness.

A year after I learned the terrible catastrophe, I fell upon my knees; I prayed for her; I prayed, above all, for you, that you might survive her.

I did not for a moment think of writing to you, or of seeing you. It is in such calamities that empty consolation is most apt to irritate and exasperate.

You have left everything, to be near to the cherished remains of Emma, and to lead a life as cold and silent as her tomb. It is both strange and wonderful, my friend, to see how great characters, great in courage, great in affection, sometimes foresee with certainty what their destiny is to be.

Three years have elapsed since Emma said to you, laughing,

"Ulric, if you lose me, what will become of you?" I hear you, even now, my friend, reply to her, with a sigh, and without concealing the tears that came into your eyes,

"I would go wherever you might be laid; I would live in solitude; I would never take consolation. Perhaps I should not have courage to see Matilda again—our friend—our sister."

These simple words, spoken by any other, would have seemed sad or exaggerated, spoken by Ulric, they had the effect of overpowering truth.

Emma and I were drowned in tears, and as much terrified as if the voice of God had at that moment warned us of the future.

This terrible promise, Ulric, you have fulfilled, as well as others which you made.

I send you these papers in all confidence, without fear of their being inopportune. When you shall read this letter, you will have the courage to think of Matilda, who was so often her companion.

This will not be a proof that you have shaken off despair; alas! you will on the contrary believe, with a sort of cruel joy, that your wounds, already so grievous, bleed afresh, when searching among these pages for all that refers to Emma.

Perhaps, for a long time, you will not read this; perhaps you will never read it. Then, my friend, you will commend these papers, as well as the box which you have received, to Stok's keeping. Two months hence I wish them to be destroyed.

I wish you to read the writing that I send you; you will know why I forward the box.

An eternal remorse pursues me, Ulric. The meeting might have been fatal to you. I have learned all—the duel! Ah! as God is my witness, I was ignorant that a living being knew the papers were in your hands.

By what fatality has this secret been discovered? By what fatality has it happened that your life—and that of a person whom I cannot accuse, have been endangered? This I probably never shall know.

Now, one word about myself, my friend.

For a long time, for more than a year, I have been very unhappy. To compare my distress with yours would be blasphemy; although life has been burdensome and painful to me.

When two months ago I came to this retreat, where I shall probably end my days, the remembrance of the past gave rise to feelings of the deepest sorrow.

I had previously such a season of mental calms, or rather of forgetfulness, that the remembrance of former days was odious to me.

Then I had this strange reflection: We calm our griefs by confiding them to others. Perhaps, in writing this history of my life, I shall get rid of the remembrances which crowd upon my mind: perhaps the silent confession will give me repose.

I thought that I should find a sort of bitter joy in returning for the last time to old reminiscences, in culling yet some precious flowers, crushed as they may be: in casting the rest to the winds of oblivion, and in pouring out the indignation which, until now, pride has always restrained.

I have not been deceived in this hope, my friend; this candid avowal of the manner of my life, of noble actions and pitiful errors, has relieved me: the phantoms which frightened my imagination have vanished.

In glancing without prejudice over bygone times, in casting up the account of my woes, in calculating coolly what had been the causes of them, scorn took the place of grief; and a mournful calm succeeded to agitation. I have spoken of good, without pride; of evil, without affected humility; I have neither slandered my enemies nor flattered my friends; I have spoken merely of their conduct toward me. I have cast over my life a glance, just and severe as that of a judge.

In thought, it was to you; it was to our friend, to our sister, that I addressed myself.

I remembered that sometimes you and she said to me—in happier days—read to me some pages of your heart. I remembered that my candor had charmed and frightened you by turns.

If you read these pages, my friend, you will not love me more, but perhaps your esteem for me will be greater.

Now my aim is accomplished: my heart mourns, but it mourns in peace, The past warns me of the future. I owe to you the repose which I enjoy. Never would I have confided these secrets to another; but this confidence soothes the saddest of my griefs.

Adieu! my friend! adieu! my brother! Remember Matilda, when reading, in the following pages, two names which shall for ever live in as holy an union in my heart, as they lived in the world: Ulric and Emma.

MATILDA.

CHAPTER VI.

MADEMOISELLE DE MARAN.

AN orphan, I past the years of childhood in the house of my aunt, Mademoiselle de Maran, my father's sister. I was nursed by Madam Blondeau, an excellent woman, who, at the time of my birth, had for a long time been in my aunt's service. My aunt never desired to marry; she was ugly, very witty, and sarcastic to a fault. Notwithstanding her deformity, her ugliness, and her Liliputian figure, you could scarcely have found a face more imposing, or, rather, more haughty, than Mademoiselle de Maran's. She, no doubt inspired that respectful confidence, which is always commanded by nobility of demeanor, and an affable dignity of manners; but her countenance created a kind of fear and defiance. Mademoiselle de Maran had never deserted my father: while the revolution was at its height, she had emigrated with him to England, after having shared his sorrows and his dangers. Whatever evil my aunt may have done me, I cannot refrain from confessing that she tenderly loved her brother; but the affection of the wicked is attended by cruel consequences, for it is said that they cherish one and hate a hundred more: they love you, but they detest those that have a right to your affection, or to whom you manifest friendship. Such was my aunt's love for my father. She always governed him by the pride and firmness of her character. He did nothing without consulting her, and the advice which she gave him was always marked with foresight, skill and experience. Hating Napoleon from the commencement of the revolution, intimately acquainted with many members of the English cabinet, anticipating the fall of the empire, she persuaded my father, in 1812, to take up his residence near Hartwell, and to pay assiduous court to Louis XVIII. She frequently saw the king herself, and pleased him by the caustic vivacity of her wit, the solidity of her judgment, and the boldness of her discourse. A perfect mistress of Latin, she seasoned her conversation by appropriate quotations; and by flattery, exceedingly delicate, because she concealed it beneath a garb of almost cynical severity. Subtle, adroit, penetrating, formidable on account of the sarcastic wickedness, with which she—fearing nobody—assailed everybody. Mademoiselle de Maran took advantage of her ugliness and infirmity, to show her resentment toward both men and women. She exposed herself to ridicule that she might sacrifice others without remorse. She employed with a most dangerous tact, the secrets which she drew from the simple and unsuspecting, to control, at some later moment the dupes of her cunning. Knowing each one's vulnerable point, she never recoiled before any ridicule, however severe it was; begging, for her own part, that they would not spare her.

She ordinarily affected a certain familiarity of language, which approached to vulgarity. I have heard her say that, having passed a part of her youth at *Pontchartrain*, the residence of old Madam de Maurepas, (during the exile of Monsieur de Maurepas in that country) she had contracted a habit of using certain vulgar expressions—a habit very much the fashion under the regency, and which had been continued by some persons even to the end of the reign of Louis XV. You must not be surprised, my friend, to meet here and there in my recital, language, which in our day seems very shocking. I will not change, anything at all, that I may paint a true likeness of Mademoiselle de Maran.

Louis XVIII, who loved cruelty in epigram and roughness in jesting, was pleased with the conversation of my aunt, and remarked, "One is more at ease with her than with a man, and less embarrassed than with a woman."

In 1812, my father, the Marquis de Maran, was about forty years of age. Many a time did he wish to marry; but his sister, who feared lest she should lose the influence which she exercised over him, had broken off his different matrimonial projects, either by calumnies adroitly circulated concerning the young ladies, who were proposed to M. de Maran, or by attributing to him a temper so violent and so treacherous, that most fathers did not wish to consider even the chances of such a connexion. M. de Maran at length saw my mother; she was so beautiful, of so charming a nature, so bewitching a spirit, that he became passionately enamoured of her; enamoured to such a degree, that he announced to my aunt at one and the same time, his love and his determination to marry.

The daughter of an emigrant, the Baron d'Arbois, an old lieutenant-general of the king's armies, my mother was poor and marvellously lovely. Mademoiselle de Maran, who was both avaricious and ugly, despised her poverty, and abhorred her beauty. She brought everything to bear—prayers, tears, threats, ridicule, perfidy—to turn my father from his resolve. He was inflexible; he married my mother. You can, my friend, imagine what must have been the rage, the hatred of my aunt toward her. For the first time in his life, my father shook off the yoke of his imperious sister. She was a woman of cunning and dissembled her resentment. In my father's presence, she was at first coldly polite to her sister-in-law; by degrees she seemed to grow gentle, and made some evident concessions; but as she continued to live with M. de Maran, it was not long before she reassumed her first empire.

The age, the sarcastic and haughty temper of Mademoiselle de Maran subdued my mother—a woman of an angelic goodness and sweetness, unequalled, save by the timidity of her disposition. My father treated her like a spoiled child, and deferred all serious matters to Mademoiselle de Maran. The latter no longer restrained herself; and she, very soon, by the sorrows which she made her suffer, punished her for the fatal union which she had contracted. My father, the best of men, was unhappily of a feeble nature, though full of justice and generosity; he loved his wife, without doubt, but he entertained for his sister as much veneration as attachment, and he considered her the surest, the most precious guide he could have.

After the first year of my father's marriage, the influence of Mademoiselle de Maran, for a while suspended, became more absolute than ever. My mother soon began, with deep grief, to perceive that she had no longer the confidence of my father. Nothing was done without the council or approbation of my aunt. Two or three times my mother endeavored to be mistress of her own house, and spoke to her husband of the encroachmenis of Mademoiselle de Maran: the most cruel scenes ensued. My father plainly declared to my mother, that he would never consent to sacrifice fraternal affection to a sentiment, earnest and lively indeed, but which had only existed for one or two years; while the former had begun and should end with his life. From that day, deeply wounded, too proud to complain, too timid to dare to struggle with her sister-in-law, my mother resigned herself, and was completely sacrificed by Mademoiselle de Maran.

The events which followed the disasters of 1813, in putting my father in a way to satisfy his ambitious views, still further augmented the influence of Mademoiselle de Maran. Thanks to the relations which he had for a long time been forming with Louis XVIII., according to the advice of his sister, M. de Maran was charged with many very delicate missions near the courts of Vienna and Berlin. He kept his sister advised of the character of these negotiations. She was, indeed, very capable of taking a part in the most important political affairs.

Her advice was very useful to my father, and the missions that were confided to him were followed by the happiest results. In 1814 he was liberally and splendidly recompenced for his services, by a very high station in the cabinet of Louis XVIII., whom, at a later period, he followed to Ghent, and with whom he returned to France.

I was born in 1813, while my Father was in Germany. This event which would perhaps have regained for my mother some influence over my father, had he been near her, brought about only a very trivial change in relations, which were already so cold. The more fortune elevated my father, the greater grew the domination of my aunt, and the more painful became the lot of my mother. My father's drawing-room became a political saloon, where Mademoiselle alone did the honors. My mother, a young lady only twenty-eight years of age, had a deep antipathy for state affairs, in which she never could feel any interest. She preferred music and poetry to the dryness of diplomatic discussion, in which she neither wished, nor was able, to take a part. Mademoiselle de Maran, on the contrary, there seemed to be in her sphere. From meeting in the world, at a later period, other political women, I am convinced that they closely resemble one another. They are a babbling race, inspired with ambitious passions, as egotistical as men are, and gifted with none of the qualities or graces of women; sterility of mind, coldness and feebleness of heart, severity of character, pretentions to wisdom ridiculously exaggerated, constitute their characteristics; in a word, political women are a mixture of the schoolmaster and the step-mother; and, whether married or not, always resemble old maids.

Very soon my mother, on a plea of ill-health, by degrees retired from the world, and this greatly pleased her sister-in-law. She concentred on me all her tenderness; she loved me as her only refuge from sorrow, her only consolation, her only hope. Her heart was so generous, so good, that she never allowed herself to utter a complaint or a reproach concerning Mademoiselle de Maran.

My father was elevated to the peerage. One last, one mortal sorrow, was reserved for my mother. She perceived that the tenderness of my father grew feebler and feebler; he granted me but few and stinted caresses, saying with regret, in his pride of belonging to the hereditary peerage, "What a pity that it had not been a boy." Very soon to the coldness of my father toward me, succeeded an entire indifference. My mother could not support this new blow; she languished for a few months longer, and then died.

I have often and most bitterly wept, while hearing my governess recount to me the last moments of the best of mothers; her terror which she felt for the future; her fears were, alas! too well justified, by seeing me fall into the hands of Mademoiselle de Maran. My mother was too conscious of the weakness of my father. She made my governess swear never to leave me; she also obtained a promise from my father that she should be retained always. "Alas! I do not forbode too much; my poor Matilda will have nobody but you in the world," said my mother to Blondeau; "do not desert her." Her last words to my father were severe, pathetic, and solemn: "I die very young; I have endured much; I have never uttered a complaint; I pardon everything; but remember you will answer to God for the fate of my child."

About a year after the death of my mother, my father, having attended

Monsieur Le Dauphin to the chase, was thrown from his horse. The consequences of that accident were mortal. I lost my father. At four years of age I was left an orphan, bequeathed to the care of my aunt, my nearest relation. Let me be just to Mademoiselle de Maran; she loved her brother as much as she was capable of loving. Her conduct toward my mother had been prompted by a jealousy that reached the verge of hatred. Mademoiselle de Maran deeply regretted my father's death. Her tears were bitter; her despair, though still was violent. Her character became more morose; her wit more caustic; her malice more pitiless.

I was the perfect image of my mother. Forgetting that I was the child of a much loved brother, my aunt looked upon me only as the daughter of a woman whom she had detested. Thus was I doomed to inherit her aversion for my mother.

During my childhood, Mademoiselle de Maran was always an object of terror to me; her long, thin, tawny face, her strangely-marked features, were rendered still harsher by a band of black false hair which partially concealed her forehead. She had thick grey eyebrows, and small twinkling hazel eyes. She always wore a gown of grey silk, and a hat of the same color and material—even at morning in her bed, where she was in the constant habit of taking her breakfast, and of reading and writing, she wore a dressing-gown of the same grey silk as was worn before the revolution. Every day when I had to visit my aunt, I was seized with an involuntary ague, and my tears suffocated me. My poor Blondeau had to exercise all her tenderness to persuade me to go near my aunt. She warned me, that if I continued to exhibit such fear, she would be forced to leave me. At this menace I overcame my apprehensions, kept down my tears, and squeezed Blondeau's fingers in my little hands as one prepared for the dreaded interviews. We had to pass first through a room where my aunt's *maitre d'hotel*, a man named Servien, was always in waiting. This man shared, with a little wolf-cur belonging to Mademoiselle de Maran, my insurmountable aversion. His face was half-covered by an abominable natural red-skin, an enormous mouth, and great hairy hands. He seemed to me, indeed, a genuine ogre.

When at last the bed-chamber door of Mademoiselle de Maran was opened, I clung to Blondeau's dress, and tremblingly drew near to my aunt's bed. My terror was not without reason; for Felix, the little white wolf-cur with pointed ears, instantly emerged from under the counterpane, and growling, displayed two rows of sharp teeth. Many a time did he bite me till I bled. All the reprimand that my aunt ever gave him was to say, in a voice sweetly harsh, as she cast upon me an angry glance, "Well! well! you little rogue, let the child alone; you see that she does not want to play with you."

Mademoiselle de Maran was very well informed, and kept up an intimate acquaintance with political affairs. I used to find her in her bed, where she was, according to her usual custom, dressed in her gown and hat of grey silk, reading the journals or some huge folio, propped on a reading-desk. She universally received me with a scolding or a sarcasm. These scenes were so constantly repeated—they left so deep an impression upon my mind, that they are still present to me in the minutest details. I lay particular stress upon this, because the incessant fear which oppressed me during my childhood, has had a powerful influence on the rest of my life. I still see the chamber of Mademoiselle de Maran. At the farther end of the alcove, hung with deep red damask, there was a large red ivory cross surmounted by a skull of the same material—both strongly relieved against a framework of black velvet. This piety I believe was only a piece of hypocrisy, a sort of tribute to appearances, for I have no recollection of ever having seen my aunt go to mass. Nearly all the window-panes were of stained glass; there was among others a picture of John the Baptist, which always pursued me in my early dreams. Beneath the secretary of red japan were to be seen, in two glass cases, the father and great grandfather of Felix, the little wolf-cur, stuffed with superior elegance. The wicked and snarling looks of these two immovable phantoms, with their eyes of brilliant enamel, frightened me even more than their living descendant. There seemed to me something supernatural in the sight of these animals in glass, who never stirred, never eat, and always showed their teeth. Many old portraits were hung against the grey wainscot; one represented my great aunt, formerly abbess of the Ursulines de Blois; her face was cold, rigid, and pale as the band of white linen which encircled her forehead and cheeks. The other portraits impressed me no less fiercely. They were those of our ancestors in court or war-dresses, belonging to the times of old. To crown all, the chimney-piece was ornamented with two hideous Chinese monsters in grim porcelain. They wer always kept in motion by means of a concealed pendulum, which made them roll about their red eyes in a ghastly manner.

Imagine to yourself, my friend, a poor child of six years old, in the midst of these mysterious prodigies, and you may form some idea of my state of terror. But, alas! they were but the prelude to many other torments. I was obliged, in spite of the growling and the teeth of Felix, to sit upon my aunt's bed and allow her to kiss me. Mademoiselle de Maran took snuff profusely, and the odor of it was intolerable to me. However, notwithstanding the fear and the aversion with which my aunt inspired me, I was touched with the marks of affection she bestowed upon me. I made unheard-of efforts to overcome my affright, but they were often unsuccessful. I found out subsequently, (and the conduct of Mademoiselle de Maran too clearly proved her aversion) that she did not force me to submit to her caresses every morning through tenderness, but a desire of amusing herself with my terror. One scene among them made an indelible impression upon me. It will enable you to judge of the character of my aunt.

One day I was, as usual, carried to her. Either through presentiment, or by chance, she had never appeared more ill-natured. I dared not approach her. I held down my head so low that my long curls fell on my face. Blondeau at last lifted me on Mademoiselle de Maran's bed. She took me roughly in her arms, and sharply exclaimed:

"Good gracious! how stupid this little thing looks, with her large, unmeaning eyes, and her hair straggling over her forehead. Come! come! that hair must be cut close, and rounded off like a boy's."

Madame Blondeau, who has since related this to me, clasped her hands and cried:

"Holy Virgin! Mademoiselle, it will be no better than a murder to cut off Matilda's beautiful flaxen locks; they reach to her feet."

"Exactly so; it will prevent her from stepping upon them. Let us despatch—the scissors!"

"Ah! Mademoiselle," said Blondeau, with tears in her eyes, "I entreat you, do not do it. If Mademoiselle will suffer me to say it, this is a sacrilege—impiety—"

"What is that? what is that?" asked my aunt, in that shrill and imperious tone, which made all around her tremble.

"Yes, Mademoiselle," continued my governess, choked with emotion; "Madame, the Marchioness, told me never to cut off her daughter's hair. Her's had never been cut in her life—poor lady! She had such beautiful hair! and for that reason she enjoined upon me—before—before she died;" and the excellent woman burst into tears.

"You are impertinent, and a miserable liar; my sister-in-law never said such a silly thing. The scissors—dispatch!"

My aunt said those words, *my sister-in-law*, in so bitter a tone of irony, that I always afterward felt my heart grow hard when I heard her speak those words. My aunt seemed so terribly enraged, that if my life had been in jeopardy I could not have been more frightened. With one hand she drew me to her, grasping my arm in her long, thin fingers, which were as hard as iron, and with the other she took out my comb and unbound by hair, which fell down and covered my shoulders. Fear rendered me dumb; I had not the strength to scream.

Mademoiselle! Mademoiselle!" said Blondeau, falling on her knees, "for heaven's sake, don't do that; some misfortune will befal Matilda: it is against the wishes of her dying mother, Mademoiselle!"

"Will you give me the scissors or no? silly brute that you are."

"But—good Heavens! good Heavens! Mademoiselle!"

Without answering her, my aunt rang the bell. Servien appeared.

"Servien, bring me your great scissors."

"Yes, Mademoiselle," said Servien.

He went out.

"Mademoiselle," cried my governess, "I am only a poor servant; you are mistress here, but I will be killed before I will suffer my darling child's hair to be touched with the scissors."

And my governess drew near the bed to snatch me from my aunt's arms. Felix, exited by this movement, jumped upon Blondeau, and bit her cheek.

"Ah! the wicked beast!" cried she in her anger; and she seized the dog by the neck, and threw her to the middle of the floor. The beast sent forth lamentable yells, and I felt my aunt's nails digging into my shoulders.

"Go away! go away, wretch!" said she to Blondeau. Then, as Servien came in, she said, "Put this insolent person out of doors, and come and hold the child while I cut off her hair."

"Mademoiselle, pardon! pardon! I was wrong—I forgot myself; but take pity on Matilda. Mercy for her beautiful hair—mercy! Oh! Mademoiselle! it was pressed by the finger of her dying mother. It is sacred, it is!"

"One word more, and I will drive you hence—do you hear?" said my aunt.

This threat completely overpowered Blondeau. She knew that my aunt was capable of keeping her word. She feared, more than all things, to leave me; she resigned herself to the sacrifice. For all my life shall I remember that scene. It appears childish; but to me it was most horrible. Servien, with his stained face, held open the scissors. I thought that he wanted to kill me, and I uttered piercing shrieks.

"Hold her in your arms," said my aunt to the man, "and hold her tight; if she struggles, she will wound herself."

Alas! I did not think of struggling; I was almost bereft of sense. Blondeau hid her bloody face; Servien took me in his big hands. I shut my eyes; I felt the coldness of the steel upon my neck; I heard the grating of the scissors, and I felt my hair tumbling about me. The execution being over, my aunt said to Servien, laughing with all her might,

"Now she looks like an ugly little ballad girl! Come, come; call one of my women to sweep away all this beautiful hair with her broom."

Blondeau tremblingly asked permission to gather the curls up and keep them. My aunt granted it, and ordered her to take me away. At the moment I was leaving the chamber, Mademoiselle bade me come back, stared at me a moment longer, and exclaimed, bursting into another fit of laughter,

"Goodness! how very ugly the little thing looks now!"

The instant we had reached the chamber occupied by Blondeau and myself, the good creature clasped me in her arms and covered me with tears and kisses. I had felt so much horror at the sight of Servien's great scissors, that the catastrophe seemed to me almost a blissful one. I did not participate in my governess's worship and admiration for my hair. I confess that I was well enough contented with being able to scamper about the garden without being obliged every instant to put away my hair from my forehead. I was troubled only by the last words of my aunt, "How ugly the little thing is now!" I begged my governess to carry me to a glass. My face there looked so strangely to me that, to the great grief of Blondeau, I began to scream with laughter.

Since then, I have been able to account for the singular conduct of Mademoiselle de Maran; she had always felt an antipathy, a profound aversion to everything that was beautiful; and without any vanity, my friend—or rather in the eyes of my blindly-attached governess—I was lovely when a child. Besides, my aunt had always hated my mother. With regard to this, alas! I subsequently made many cruel discoveries.

CHAPTER VII.

THE PROTECTOR.

I WAS now seven years old. The aversion which Mademoiselle de Maran entertained for me, appeared to increase rather than to diminish. She ingeniously devised all sorts of petty torments to inflict upon me.

I had always, up to this time, dined with my governess: now, my aunt insisted upon my sitting at her table near her. Her snuff-box disgusted me much, she placed it constantly near my plate. If any dish displeased me, they brought it to me every day; if I could not overcome my dislike, to punish me, Mademoiselle de Maran had my plate placed in the corner with Felix, and, notwithstanding my terror of him, I was condemned to look for this food on my knees, and to eat it on my knees.

My aunt had remarked, that the presence of my good Blondeau gave me the courage to endure everything without crying; she forbade her remaining in the room to serve me. Her *maitre d'hotel*, Servien, had this charge; and this man inspired me with mortal disgust and terror.

I have never been able to comprehend how my aunt, notwithstanding her occupations—notwithstanding her really superior mind, could calculate so minutely, and with such perseverance, how to torment a child. She left nothing to chance. Her conduct toward me was deeply matured and studied.

Little by little, I inured myself to suffering. It awakened in me a desire for vengeance. I observed, that the more I cried the more my aunt felt satisfied and laughed. After unheard-of efforts to constrain my tears, I at length succeeded. It was with great delight that I perceived the astonishment, the vexation of my aunt. She redoubled her harshness, and I my courage aud dissimulation.

I frequently tremble, even now, when I reflect upon the contest thus commenced between a poor forsaken child, and such a woman as Mademoiselle de Maran—a contest in which I came off triumphantly, for the malignity of my aunt could not extend beyond a certain limit. Everybody in the house trembled before her, and my governess was every day subjected to a thousand little annoyances. It required all the heroic devotion of this excellent woman to surmount the disgust that she felt at this ill-usage. My aunt attempted twice to separate us, but I fell so seriously ill, that she was obliged to give up any further attempt in that respect.

I do not know whether it was from a settled resolution of my aunt, or from her neglect, that, up to seven years old, Ihad no masters of any kind provided for me.

My governess had taught me to read and write; she made me say my prayers, my catechism; I thus received, thanks to the almost maternal affection of this excellent creature, the education which a person of her class would have given to her daughter.

Children are never deceived as to the sentiments and character of the persons who surround them. Their penetration is amazing; when they see they are beloved, they know with incredible ability how to ensure their empire.

Although timid and silent with Mademoiselle de Maran, I was proportionately gay, turbulent and despotic, with my governess. She never resisted even my most extravagant wishes, unless my health might be endangered by the indulgence of them. She idolized me, overwhelmed me with praises of my beauty, my understanding, and my liveliness.

Thus passed my childhood, between the sarcasms and harsh treatment of my aunt, and the fond flatteries of Blondeau.

My character could not but be influenced by these opposing modes of treatment. I was by turns haughty and humble to excess, beaming with happiness or overwhelmed by discontent, and I felt love and hate to a degree incredible at my age. My aunt's cruelties rendered me almost joyful: because they offered me the means of setting her at defiance, and of irritating her by my calmness.

She revenged herself by persuading me, with infinite art, that I was stupid and ugly. While she was present I restrained by tears, but hastened to my governess, threw myself into her arms, and there sobbed aloud. In order to pacify me, the poor woman lavished upon me the most extravagant encomiums, and it ended by my believing them.

Hence, no doubt, arose my proneness to extreme resentments ; hence the unwillingness I have since felt to adopt those *mezze termine* so frequent in the world.

Years have not, however, modified in me this singular mode of estimating myself. Instead of choosing a reasonable medium between two exaggerations; instead of considering myself neither wholly inferior nor wholly superior to others, I have existed in perpetual alternations of either insolent assurance or painful diffidence. Past triumphs did not prevent my being oppressed by a ridiculous humility, or past humiliations from being vain-glorious, even to disdain.

From the first word, the first look, I either governed or was governed, and that in even the most ordinary relations of life. I have known persons who, and with reason, were generally dreaded; before whom the most confident trembled, and whom I have completely and always overawed; while, on the other hand, persons utterly ignorant, assumed absolute empire over me.

From the unhappy circumstances attending my earlier education, I could not but retain the habit, the power of dissembling my vexations and my sufferings, and of revenging the insults, the ills inflicted upon me, by an appearance of disdainful insensibility.

I was not, I believe, seven years old, when my education was altogether changed. The events which brought about this revolution have remained indelibly fixed upon my memory.

I had been abandoned to the care of my aunt, by the advice of my guardian, Baron d'Orbeval, a distant relation of my father, and whom I saw very rarely. When he came to see Mademoiselle de Maran, I was sent for; they took off the more than modest pinafore in which my aunt insisted I should always be dressed; I was then dressed with a little more neatness, and taken before my guardian.

He was a tall, pale man, with a weasel face, wearing a light-colored wig, much curled, and a green silk shade over his eyes; he was dressed in a *douilette*, (a sort of over-coat) of puce-colored silk, much worn. He was a councellor in the court of cassation, and sordidly avaricious.

When I approached him, he used to look at me in a severe manner, and ask me if I had been good: my aunt, in general, took upon herself to answer him, saying that I was willful, stupid, and idle.

My guardian would then give me a tolerably hard fillip on the cheek, saying to me;

"Miss Matilda, that is very bad! very bad!—if this continues, we must send you among the little beggar girls." I would burst into tears, and Blondeau would take me away.

About four months had elapsed since I had been presented to my guardian, when one morning I saw a man, apparently still young, enter my room. I had not seen him before. As soon as he came in, Blondeau jumped up, clasped her hands with an expression of surprise and joy, and exclaimed—"Oh! Heaven! It is you, it is you, M. de Mortagne?"

The latter, without replying to my aunt, took me in his arms, looked at me in silence with eager curiosity, and then, having tenderly embraced me, put me down again, and said, wiping away his tears—"How much she resembles her! how much she resembles her!" He remained some time in a sort of revery.

The face of this stranger seemed so benevolent, notwithstanding the severity of his features; he appeared so strongly affected while looking at me; his presence seemed to give so much pleasure to Blondeau, that I approached him without fear.

He was a first-cousin of my mother; he had been travelling for several years, and had only just arrived in France.

The Count de Mortagne was considered a very eccentric man. He had served, and very bravely served, during the empire. Since then it was impossible to account for the wandering life he had led. He had travelled in both worlds. He was said to be endowed with prodigious learning, an unbending disposition, an indomitable courage; but his almost brutal frankness had gained him but few friends.

He had loved my mother with the affectionate tenderness of a brother.

He had several times attempted to convince my father of the full value of the treasure which he neglected, to follow the ambitious counsel of Mademoiselle de Maran. My aunt had therefore taken a decided aversion to M. de Mortagne; but as a member of the family council, and as such, charged with the care of my interests, he sometimes found himself compelled to visit Mademoiselle de Maran.

For four years he had been travelling in India. His first visit after arriving in Paris, was to me.

He could not cease looking at me, admiring me, praising me. He overwhelmed Blondeau with questions: Was I happy? Did I receive the education which I ought to receive? Who were my masters? At seven years old I ought to know many things; I looked so intelligent! I ought to have made much progress in the education which had been given me.

My poor governess dared hardly answer him. At last, with many tears, she acknowledged the whole truth; the little that I knew, she had herself taught me; Mademoiselle de Maran had become more and more severe and unjust toward me. All the little pleasures of my age had been denied me, and what had exasperated Blondeau beyond all, I was never dressed as the daughter of the Marchioness de Maran ought to be.

Every word my governess uttered increased the indignation of M. de Mortagne. He was a man of great stature, but always careless as to dress. Although not quite forty years of age, his head was entirely bald; and what was considered very singular in those days, he wore a long beard, as many persons do at the present day.

The abruptness of his manners, the military boldness of his conversation, his strange and almost savage physiogomy; had given him in society the name of *The Peasant of the Danube.*

He belonged to the ultra-liberal party of that time, and did not in anywise conceal his political opinions, although some persons, well-disposed toward him, had cautioned him to express himself more moderately.

When he wished to do so, he concealed the most cutting irony under an appearance of simple good-nature; but, usually, his language was harsh, rude, and almost brutal.

When my governess had explained to M. de Mortagne the manner in which

I had been brought up by my aunt, my cousin's face, tanned by the Indian sun, became purple with anger; he walked up and down the room for some moments, in great agitation; then, suddenly snatching me in his arms, he went toward the apartment of Mademoiselle de Maran, exclaiming, "Ah! this is the way in which she treats the child of my poor cousin. I shall say two words, to her about it; ay, and with my loud voice, too!"

"But, count," said my governess, following him, and much alarmed.

"Do not be alarmed, Madame Blondeau; I am not to be intimidated by a trifle! I have crushed, with my foot, reptiles more dangerous still than Mademoiselle de Maran;" and he kissed me, saying, "poor little thing, your fate is about to change."

I shall never forget the joy I felt, when I imagined that my protector was going to avenge the cruelties my aunt had inflicted upon me. In my delight, I put my arms round M. de Mortagne's neck, and thinking to render him an important service, I whispered to him, "It is not my aunt only that is malicious, but her dog Felix is so too; you must take very good care of yourself, sir, for he bites very sharp."

"Should he bite me, my little Matilda, I will throw him out of the window," replied M. de Mortagne, kissing me again.

It seemed to me, that M. de Mortagne was a perfect hero. For the first time, I felt the ardor of revenge.

Servien was, as usual, in the waiting-room, adjacent to the bed-room of his mistress. M. de Mortagne, followed by Madam Blondeau, was about to open the door, when the Maitre d'hotel got up and said, "I do not know, sir, whether my mistress is visible."

M. de Mortagne, without answering him, pushed him aside with his elbow, and walked into my aunt's room. She was sitting up in her bed, in her cloak and bonnet of grey silk, and as usual, reading the newspapers.

The entrance of M. de Mortagne was so sudden, and accompanied with so much noise, that Felix, being alarmed, rushed furiously out of his niche, and made a violent attack on my protector's legs.

"Take care! take care! that is the wicked dog," whispered I to M. de Mortagne.

"So much for him," said M. de Mortagne, and with one kick, my avenger sent Felix rolling under the bed.

When my aunt heard the howling of the dog, and being much irritated at the entrance of M. de Mortagne, whom she detested, she cried out harshly, this conduct is unaccountable, sir! What do you mean by it? Rushing into my room as if you were taking it by assault! trampling upon my poor dog! Pray, sir, do you imagine you are in a barrack-yard?"

M. de Mortagne has often since related this scene to me.

He sat himself down, without ceremony, by Mademoiselle de Maran's bed, holding me upon his knee, and then said. "This is no question, madam, either of dogs or of assaults. I am come to talk about this poor child, whom you are bringing up like a barbarous step-mother—"

"What do you say? what do you say?" replied my aunt, with a haughty air. "Have you returned from the antipodes, sir, to speak to me in this insolent manner? Because your appearance is that of a frightful savage, and because your reputation for boorishness is perfectly well established and well-merited, it does not follow that I will allow myself to be either insulted or intimidated in my own house: do you understand me, sir?"

"And because, madam, you have the happiness of uniting the ugliness and bad disposition of the late Duke of Gevres with the deformity and wit of Esop; it does not follow, either, that I should submit to your insolence: do you understand me, madam?" replied M. de Mortagne, who had always retorted upon Mademoiselle de Maran coarseness for coarseness.

My aunt became pale with anger: "Have you a care, sir? when I hate, I hate well; and when I really hate, I give proofs of it."

"I know that you have powerful friends and dangerous parasites about you. I require nothing of any one. I fear not any one. I shall, therefore, speak the truth to you. Should it wound you, so much the worse. I have spoken it to many who did not die of it, unfortunately. In a word, this child has been most shamefully brought up; her education has been so much neglected, that I blush for you. Are you not ashamed to have so cruelly treated the daughter of your brother!"

These words recalled to my aunt's mind, at the same moment, the love she had borne my father, and her hatred toward my mother. She exclaimed, "And it is because the memory of my brother is sacred to me, that I treat that little one as it suits me to treat her. She is confided to my care; her guardian is the only person to whom I am accountable; therefore, sir, carry your brutalities elsewhere; what is done here is no concern of yours."

"So much does it concern me, that, as a member of the family council, I shall this very day demand its convocation: and then we shall inquire whether your niece has, up to the present time, received that education to which she has a right to pretend.

This menace appeared to produce a great effect on Mademoiselle de Maran. "Come here, little one, and answer me," she said, beckoning me to approach her.

Instead of obeying her, I pressed close to M. de Mortagne, looking at him with an imploring air.

"You see that you alarm her horribly with your tenderness," rejoined M. de Mortagne. "It is not this child who must answer: It is you. She has not a single master! She has hardly learned as much as the children of the lower classes know at her age! You even refuse her clothing befitting her position. And yet you are sufficiently well paid for taking care of her."

"What does this mean? I am paid?" exclaimed my aunt, indignantly.

"It only means, that you are paid a thousand franks per month, out of the fortune of this poor child, to meet any expenses you may incur for her; and seeing the manner in which she is dressed and instructed, 'tis clear she cannot cost you much more than that per annum. What have you done with the remainder? If you have pocketed it, you must account for it. Moreover, be assured that I will look to it. Your being wicked and malicious is no proof that you are not miserly."

"But this is absolutely beyond bearing! Were it not known that you are more than half mad, sir, this would be enough to have you thrown out of the window. Must I render you an account? What is the meaning of this inquisitorial impertinence?" cried Mademoiselle de Maran, tossing and tumbling about her bed in a violent rage.

"I tell you that I am her relation, her adviser; do you understand me?" replied M. de Mortagne, in a voice of thunder; and as such, I shall cite you to appear before the family council to answer for your conduct. If you refuse to do me justice, and to condemn you, I will take the matter into my own hands, and you and I will settle the affairs tête-à-tête, which will not be particularly agreeable to me. Once for all—you are a monster."

"Oh! the abominable wretch! he will make me ill with his brutality. To treat an unhappy woman in this manner!" said my aunt, in a doleful tone.

"It is long since, madam, that you, by the boldness of your machinations, the malice of your insinuations, have made the world forget that pity which it ought to feel for age, for ugliness, and for infirmities. Bah! you are no longer a woman."

"How! no longer a woman! I am an unicorn, perhaps? But, really, you ought to be locked up, sir! But get away with you—get away with you! I do not wish to make a disturbance before my servants. Otherwise—"

"Otherwise, madam, it would be precisely the same thing; all you would gain by it would be witnesses. This is my last word: I am now going to call upon every member of the family council, in order to persuade them (and I shall succeed) to take from you this unfortunate child, and place her either at a boarding-school or in a convent."

"And, in order to perfect this grand work," rejoined Mademoiselle de Maran, speaking ironically, "they will, without doubt, request you to designate the convent she should be sent to? 'Tis a great pity there are no longer any *Jacobines*—you would have sent her there at once, would you not? And in remembrance of your *brothers and friends* of '93, whose history you so much delighted in, you would call her *Mamselle Scipionne*, or *Mamselle Egalite;* but what am I saying! *Mamselle*, indeed? *citoyenne*, if you please. Unfortunately, those good days are gone by; and in our day, sir, in all and everything, we consider, sir, and consider severely, sir—do you hear? the *opinions* of people who wish to get the better of well-thinking persons."

Mademoiselle de Maran accentuated these words in such a way as to make M. de Mortagne comprehend their meaning.

"Ah! here we are," exclaimed he; "I marvelled much you had so long abstained from indulging me with the title of *Jacobin* or Bonapartist, which, nevertheless, do not run well together. I know that you are perfidious enough to raise a party-question in council, as to my charge against you. I know your *ultra* relations are in great number in the council. I know that they will blindly, follow your opinion, and it is probable they will, on this occasion, as on every other, make an unfair use of their majority;" and embracing me with tender emotion, M. de Mortagne added, scornfully, "Poor child! poor France!"

Oh, Heaven! this is at once superb and touching!" exclaimed my aunt, laughing heartily, in her sharp and insolent way. "Oh, Heaven! think of the magnificence of this assimulation: 'Poor child! poor France!' The tender Saint Just used to deal out these pretty pastoral sayings at the club of the *Cordeliers*, I believe; but this did not prevent him from cutting peoples' heads off the next morning. Yes, yes; I perceive by your violent rage, sir, that, did it depend on you, you would treat me according to the fashion of these poor *friends and brothers;* for, truly, notwithstanding your noble birth, you were worthy to be one of them: you were of the party of those *gentlemen of the Loire*."

M. de Mortagne told me, afterward, that these cutting and cruel sarcasms of my aunt have put him quite beside himself, and that he reproached himself for having brutally replied to them:

"'Tis true, when I reflect that you murdered my cousin, by the grief you caused her—when I reflect that you have tortured an unhappy child with diabolical wickedness—I ask myself, whether that which is morally and physically unnatural, ought not to be placed without the pale and the protection of the laws?"

"Enough of this insulting language! Leave the house, sir, leave the house!" shrieked Mademoiselle de Maran, with such furious vehemence, that when M. de Mortagne, on rising from his seat, wished to set me down, I clung to him with all my strength. He put me into the arms of my governess, who had remained silent and unperceived during this scene.

We all three left the room together. It would be difficult to depict the anger of my aunt.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FAMILY COUNCIL.

I DID not comprehend much from the conversation which had passed between M. de Mortagne and my aunt. I had only experienced great delight in hearing my protector speak in so firm a manner to Mademoiselle de Maran.

I foresaw that it would produce some favorable change in my position. The idea of being sent to a convent or a boarding-school, which, in general, is so appalling to children, had a very contrary effect upon me; my most earnest desire was to be removed from my aunt's house.

The family council was to deside whether I was to remain under the control of Mademoiselle de Maran. I prayed most fervently that M. de Mortagne might succeed in his intentions. The fatal day at length arrived; my aunt had me dressed very neatly, and took me down into the parlor where all the members of our family had assembled.

I looked around the room for M. de Mortagne; he had not yet arrived, My aunt made me sit down between her and M. d'Orbeval, my guardian.

All our relations appeared to be in dread of Mademoiselle de Maran, and paid her the most obsequious attention. They knew that she possessed great influence. Her drawing-room was the resort of the leading men in the government. From respect to Louis XVIII., the princes of the royal family showed a marked deference to Mademoiselle de Maran.

The Prince de Talleyrand frequently divided his evenings between my aunt and the Princess de Vaudemont. My aunt, with much judgment, used to observe, that this great statesman "could render silence eloquent, elevate wit to genius, and make experience the source of divination." He used frequently to pass an hour tête-à-tête with Mademoiselle de Maran, for she was one of those women whom even the master spirits of the age were glad to consult.

Children are above all struck with appearances: they cannot comprehend the influence exercised by intrigue and wit. For a long time I could in no wise understand how it was that Mademoiselle de Maran, in defiance of her mean and almost grotesque appearance, should exercise such unbounded sway over persons who were not necessarily compelled to submit to her authority.

When my aunt was seated, the top of her head appeared to be about upon a level with her left shoulder, which was considerably higher than the right one; her long feet, upon which she always wore black chamois leather shoes, reposed upon a very high footstool, which she shared with her favorite, Felix.

Despite her ugliness, despite the perversity of her character, Mademoiselle de Maran every evening saw her drawing-room filled with the élite of the best society in Paris, and rated soundly those who accidently absented themselves for several days. Her bitter and angry reproaches evinced clearly that it was not affection for the party which made her appreciate their homage, but that her pride was mortified when they stayed away.

We were all waiting for M. de Mortagne; he at last arrived. My heart beat with violence. Upon him depended my future destiny.

I soon observed, that M. de Mortagne was coldly received by my relations. His neglected dress and beard caused many a smile and whisper, although his eccentricities were well known. They well knew the aversion of my aunt toward him. They flattered her by ridiculing him.

After some moments of silence, M. d'Orbeval, my guardian, requested M. de Mortagne to again state his reasons for having convened a family council.

M. de Mortagne repeated, almost word for word, all that he had said to my aunt, and without being in any way cautious as to the terms he used; he concluded, by requesting that I should be sent to the Convent des Anglaises, an establishment which was then as much in vogue as that of the Sacre Cœur was subsequently.

During this violent accusation, Mademoiselle de Maran remained perfectly motionless. Our relations, who were completely subjugated by her, were dreadfully in fear of her. They several times evinced their indignation at M. de Mortagne's attack upon her, by murmurs and other interruptions; the looks which they addressed to my aunt, appeared to call upon her to witness that they protested against the brutal language used by my protector. The latter appeared to be perfectly indifferent to these interruptions; he merely shrugged his shoulders, waiting patiently till the interruption had ceased to resume his argument; but did not in any way modify his expressions.

It certainly required much courage to attack Mademoiselle de Maran in the manner he did; possessing the influence she did, she could easily have found a thousand modes of angering M. de Mortagne, and of revenging herself. Alas! she proved, but too sensibly, that the hate she bore him was deadly and implacable.

I was then very young; but I well remember an incident which, although apparently insignificant, struck me forcibly, and of which I now clearly can judge the full importance.

During the time that M. de Mortagne was speaking, my aunt betrayed no species of emotion; she had in her hand a long knitting-needle, which, as he proceeded, she seemed to grasp more tightly between her fleshless fingers.

Finally, when he exclaimed, that "nothing could be more respectable than ugliness, old age and infirmity—nothing could be more cowardly than to shelter oneself behind these deplorable advantages, and to reply insolently, when required to account for conduct, which had been as cruel as ungrateful" —Mademoiselle de Maran, as if by accident, broke the needle which she held between her fingers; and I shall never forget the withering look she cast upon M. de Mortagne at that moment.

My Guardian thought it his duty, in the name of the majority of the family council, to reply to this attack against my aunt, and severely reproved the language used by her antagonist. My protector appeared to pay little attention to this attack, after which, M. d'Orbeval with the most respectful deference, and apparently only as a matter of form, asked Mademoiselle de Maran, whether she considered it necessary in any way to change the system of my education; assuring her, beforehand, that the family council would naturally acceed to her determination upon a subject, which she, of course, could better appreciate than any other person.

Mademoiselle de Maran, without alluding in the slightest degree to the attacks of M. de Mortagne, but with infinite subtlety and address, replied. "that I was no doubt very backward in my education, that my intellects were not of the finest order, and she had considered it more prudent not to fatigue a mind naturally weak, by giving me lessons which I could not profit by, and which would only have created a distaste in me for learning; she had therefore thought it better, in the first instance, to pay a strict attention to my health, which, thanks to Heaven! was in a very robust state. That I was, now, therefore, in perfect condition to regain the time I had lost, without anything to dread from the fatigue of forced study." She concluded by stating, "that previously to the convocation of the family council, she had determined upon my immediately commencing a regular course of study."

M. de Mortagne had frequently told me, that it was impossible for any one to have defended herself more adroitly than my aunt then did, or to color her conduct with more specious appearances. She clearly demonstrated, that by economizing greatly during the earlier years of my instruction, she had reserved the means of giving me, when I was more capable of benefitting by it, a more complete and extended education. She added, that it was very natural that I should become tired of remaining in the same house with an old and infirm person; but she had promised my father that she would never abandon me, and therefore she could not conceive that my relations would feel any desire that I should enter a convent.

In order to conciliate every one, and to show that I should have, in future, companion of my own age, my aunt announced to the council, that my ardian, having yielded to her solicitations, had consented to withdraw his ughter from a convent, and to confide her to her care.

M. d'Orbeval was a widower; his daughter would thus be the companion of my studies, and live under the same roof with me.

With his habitual abruptness and frankness, M. de Mortagne observed, that by this mode it would be at my expense Mademoiselle d'Orbeval would receive her education. She was poor and her father had, of course, consented to this arrangement from interested motives, and from fear of my aunt, who could either injure him or be of service to him as she pleased.

M. de Mortagne went on to say, that under any other circumstances, he should not have raised any objection to my receiving a private education, or to my pursuing it with my young relation; but that he had the most powerful reasons for believing that the influence of Mademoiselle de Maran could not be otherwise than fatal to me; that she had tortured my infancy, and that she would, most probably destroy my youth.

A burst of indignation prevented his proceeding.

M. d'Orbeval exclaimed, that his daughter should never put her foot within the doors of Mademoiselle de Maran; that it was only for my advantage he had acceded to the proposal which had been made to him; but finding that his motives were so misinterpreted, he should retract the promise he had given. However, the whole meeting having joined Mademoiselle de Maran in appeasing M. d'Orbeval, and blaming M. de Mortagne, my guardian at last consented to his daughter's coming. M. de Mortagne, who could not restrain his anger, forgot himself so far, as to declare that there was not a man of courage in the council; that they were all humbled before the influence of Mademoiselle de Maran. He offered to maintain this opinion sword in hand against any present. There was a general shout of indignation against him, the men exclaiming that he was a blustering bully, who sought to maintain his opinions by brute force against those of the family council, and that he respected neither sex, nor old age.

M. de Mortagne was much irritated; he approached me, embraced me tenderly, and said, "My poor child! we shall meet again shortly. May God protect you from this wicked woman and her flatterers. They have now the law and a majority on their side. Patience! patience! I will still find the means of serving you in spite of them." He kissed me again and again, and then left the room.

After he had withdrawn, my relations redoubled their expressions of indignation, which soon calmed down to an affected feeling of contemptuous pity.

Those among them who, from their age, might have replied to the provoking taunts of M. de Mortagne, but who had not done so—not from any want of personal courage, but from fear of my aunt—affirmed that M. de Mortagne's brain was turned; and that they were not called upon to notice such utter madness.

Although I sincerely regretted the defeat of my good protector, I could not think without delight of the new companion that was promised me; I regarded her father, M. d'Orbeval, with less apprehension; and I ventured even to ask my aunt when I should see my cousin.

To my great astonishment, Mademoiselle de Maran answered me without anger, and almost in an affectionate tone, that Mademoiselle Ursula d'Orbeval would very shortly arrive.

This assurance perfectly delighted me. Had I been happier, I might have looked with jealousy on the arrival of my cousin: while, on the contrary, I now considered that it must produce a pleasing change in my position.

From that day, the conduct of Mademoiselle de Maran toward me was completely changed. In the first place, she procured the best professors in Paris to instruct me. From a motive which I afterward discovered, she allowed me to retain Madam Blondeau as governess, although she was far from possessing the knowledge necessary to fulfil the duties of such an office, at a time when my education was to be so much more carefully attended to.

She also gave me a waiting-woman, and instead of allowing me to be dressed in an almost mean, and miserable manner, my aunt had me attired with an elegance and care which were even inconsistent with my years.

I well remember the joy and surprise I experienced, on finding, as I entered one day into my room, an upright looking-glass and a toilette table, ornamented with an abundance of ribbons and laces.

Instead of constantly scolding me, and expatiating upon my ugliness and my stupidity, my aunt, all at once, began to overpower me with the most exaggerated praises upon my beauty, my fine shape, the elegance of my figure, and my happy disposition!

As this abrupt change of manner might have greatly astonished me, Mademoiselle de Maran told me, in confidence, that it would have been very dangerous to have imparted to me these charming truths while I had been so indolent, when my vanity might have been dangerously excited; but now that I was studying assiduously, it was, in a manner, rewarding me, to let me know that there was nothing in the world more charming than myself.

The attendant whom my aunt had given me, repeated the same praises to me; and, finally, every person in the house, even Servien himself, tried who most could flatter me.

My faithful Blondeau, with that instinct, that profound sagacity of the heart which devoted affection inspires, was alarmed by this violent change in my aunt's conduct. She, on the contrary, was the first to scold me, to reproach me for paying too much attention to my dress, neglecting my prayers, and becoming haughty and capricious.

Notwithstanding my attachment to this excellent woman, I felt shocked at her remonstrances. They appeared to me the more painful, from her having, up to that time, treated me with almost idolatrous fondness.

I felt my affection toward her cooling; while, on the contrary, my confidence in Julia, my waiting-woman, daily became stronger, who, on her part, omitted no opportunity of irritating me against my governess.

In spite of the affectionate attentions of Mademoiselle de Maran, I could not surmount the fear and aversion with which she had inspired me. I used every effort to overcome them, thinking that gratitude required I should evince some attachment for her.

I really made rapid progress in my studies. I applied myself sedulously to learn drawing, music, and the English and Italian languages, that I might not be so much inferior to my cousin, Ursula d'Orbeval, whose arrival my aunt continually postponed.

My aunt rarely went out. She sent me almost daily to have a drive in her carriage to the Bois de Boulogne, with Julia, for I did not attempt to hide my preference for this girl. During our ride, she kept incessantly remarking to me, that I excited universal admiration,

In short, about a year after my aunt had begun to pay such particular attention to my education, I scarcely felt like the same person. I had gained much information; my mind was greatly enlarged; but the seeds of the most direful passions began to take root within me.

Although an ivory crucifix ornamented the alcove of my aunt, she did not appear to pay any outward attention to religious duties.

She confined herself to sending me to mass to the church of St. Thomas of Aquins, with one of her women. A man servant followed me, bearing a cushion emblazoned with the family arms, for my feet, and a velvet bag, which contained my prayer-book. All this pomp was as ridiculous as it was unsuitable for a child of my age; and I used to hear people say, as I went along, "The doting fondness of Mademoiselle de Maran for her neice amounts almost to folly."

I at last began to be convinced of the sincerity of this fondness. Everybody said that my aunt idolized me, and that if I did not answer her expectations, she would have to thank her own weakness and indulgence for it.

Even to this day, many people are convinced that Mademoiselle de Maran always loved me—loved me, indeed, too tenderly.

There are no creatures in the world more loving, and at the same time cruelly egotistical, than children.

I felt a barbarous delight in heaping marks of kindness on my new waiting-woman, and particularly when Blondeau was present, in order to *spite* the latter, as little girls say.

The unhappy woman, although possessing much good sense, and not allowing herself to be irritated by bare envy, could not help suffering dreadfully when she found herself overlooked and forgotten by me—she who loved me with such sincerity.

My ingratitude toward her, at length, had passed all bounds.

In proportion as my intelligence expanded, Mademoiselle de Maran inspired me, if not with affection, at least with curiosity. My mind began to comprehend her raillery, and to be amazed by it; she ridiculed Blondeau—her stiff manners, her remonstrances as to my coquettishness—and she made me laugh at her sallies. She ridiculed her ignorance, her uncouth expressions, and I laughed still more.

All this was doubtless wrong—very wrong; but I was barely eight years old; and a woman, of really very superior understanding, took advantage of her powers to lead me into fatal error.

I followed her counsel but too well; I evinced so much coldness toward my governess, that the unhappy woman was so much grieved at it that she fell seriously ill, after having endeavored all she could to re-awake my former attachment to her.

When I saw her pale, and suffering so severely, I perceived the extent of the fault I had committed; I wept bitterly, and would not again leave her. My aunt, observing my affliction, persuaded me that Blondeau's illness was but acting—a mere feint. This odious interpretation, which I believed, afforded me an excuse for my ingratitude.

I shall never forget the painful astonishment portrayed in every feature, when my governess saw me return to her, smiling, playful, and ridiculing her illness. She raised her emaciated hands to heaven, and, weeping bitterly, exclaimed:

"My God! she, who had her mother's heart! they have ruined her, ruined *her!*"

From that day the poor woman became more melancholy, more taciturn. Although extremely weak, she insisted upon getting up; absent and absorbed, she appeared preoccupied by some fixed idea. The servants almost made sport of her. She, who was formerly so impatient with them, appeared to suffer all their taunts with resignation, or rather with indifference. She rarely spoke to me.

I remember that, waking one night, I found her with her head hanging over my pillow, her eyes overflowing with tears, looking at me with indiscribable anguish.

I was alarmed; I pretended to fall asleep again. In the morning I told my aunt what had happened. She said it was a trick of Blondeau's, who had wished to terrify me. I believed Mademoiselle de Maran, and I felt greater ill-will toward my governess.

New Year's day arrived. The evening before, my aunt, speaking of the New Year's gift for Blondeau, said, "Instead of giving her a dress, or any trinket, you should give her money. *Such people love money more than anything!*" and she gave me five louis for her.

In former years, my aunt had never given me anything for Blondeau. I was then tenderly attached to her, and was always anxious to make her some little present. I every year, in secret, employed myself in embroidering, as well as I could, some little piece of tapestry for her; and used all sorts of schemes to hide myself, while I wrote her a few lines of tender endearment, with which to surprise her on the occasion.

It was impossible to conceive the joy, the delight with which Madam Blondeau received these little gifts, which I always presented to her throwing my arms about her neck, after having said my prayers on New Year's eve.

Now that I reflect upon it, it appears to me that there was something touchingly religious in these testimonies of the affection of a poor orphan, abandoned, rejected by every one, who, having nothing else to give, had recourse to her own childish fingers to acquit a debt of affection.

Notwithstanding the inferiority of her position, my governess had too much soul not to be touched, even to tears, with these proofs of my attachment, and which no one had suggested to me.

Her grief will be readily conceived when, on the New Year's eve in question, I, with a gay and laughing air, slipped the five louis into her hand.

She had expected one of my usual gifts; as I began to draw passably well, she had even ventured to hope that I would give her some proof of my new acquirement. Notwithstanding my manifest ingratitude, she could not for a moment believe it possible, that I should so far have forgotten every feeling of delicacy; therefore, looking at me with as much sorrow as surprise, she returned me the money, saying, "You have made a mistake, Matilda, this is for Julia; but for me—for me, you have something else, have you not?" and here her voice faltered, and she looked at me with uneasiness and alarm.

"No, no," said I, "I have nothing else to give you."

"Yet, in former years—" (and she endeavored to conceal her tears) "in former years, you recollect, in the evening after your prayers, you used to give me—"

"Ah, yes! I understand what you would say; but now, you see, I have no time for such things; I am obliged to study. And, besides, people like you *love money more than anything.*"

And then, without embracing her—without giving her the slightest mark of affection, I put the gold into her hand, and ran out of the room gaily, to examine a magnificent ermine cloak, which Mademoiselle de Maran was about to give me.

On leaving my governess, I heard a piteous moan, and the noise of the gold coin falling from her hand upon the floor.

In my pitiless indifference, in my haste to inspect the present from my aunt, I did not stay a moment; I did not even turn my head.

Alas! my friend, although still young, I have suffered much; I have shed bitter tears! but Heaven knows, that while in the most violent paroxysms of despair, I have often exclaimed, I ought to bear every ill without complaining; for I inflicted on one of the best of created beings, the most intense pain that the human heart can suffer.

The same evening, in spite of my indifference, I felt ashamed of myself when I thought of poor Blondeau. I expected she would reproach me for my unkindness; but, on the contrary, I found her more affectionate than usual, only that she was very pale, and much afflicted. I observed something extraordinary in her look.

She put me to bed, and kissed me several times with great tenderness; I felt her tears trickling down my cheeks. My better feelings acquired their empire over me; I threw my arms round her neck, and begged her forgiveness for having hurt her feelings.

"I accuse you, my child? you, my child? never!" she said, weeping and kissing my hair and hands: "never! poor dear child! While they permitted you to be so, you were good and excellent: you have been in everything the very picture of your mother. But, do not let us say any more about it. Say your prayers. Pray, also, for your poor governess; she stands in need that you should pray for her. The prayers of children are like those of angels, and God loves them, and grants what they request.

When I had said my prayers, she kissed me tenderly on the forehead, and said, "And now, my child, good night, good night."

I remarked that she trembled—that her hands were burning; and, notwithstanding, her face was of a deadly paleness.

I went to sleep. I do not know how long I remained so, when I was suddenly awakened by feeling a heavy pressure. In my alarm I half-opened my eyes. By the light of a night-lamp, I saw my governess—she was standing near my bed—she had awakened me in trying to kiss me.

Not daring to move, I followed her with my eyes; her features, usually so sweet, so calm, had now in them a sinister expression which chilled me with fear.

She was looking at me, and speaking to me in a low voice, and with a distracted air.

"Ho, ho!" she said, "I can no longer support this. This monster is ruining my child; she has rendered her indifferent, has taught her to despise me. Matilda no longer loves me. I can no longer be of any service to her: I need not remain here. And I could not bear it,—no, I have suffered too much this day; they have filled the measure to overflowing. Money—to me—ah! I shall go mad—I believe that I am so already. It is time that this should end. One last kiss of that poor little sleeping angel: she prayed for me, and our heavenly Father will forgive me."

Saying these words, Blondeau kissed my forehead, and then weeping, continued:

"Adieu! adieu! thou shalt never know the harm that thou hast done me, poor little one. It is not thee that I accuse. Oh, no! it is that monster, who caused thy mother to die of grief, and who wishes to destroy thy soul. Adieu! again adieu! Oh! those lovely golden locks! let me kiss them only once more!" and I felt her icy lips upon my forehead.

I had until then kept my eyes closed, although I was awake. I suddenly opened them. I saw my governess go toward the window, and open it violently. I at once conceived her fatal intention: I rushed toward her, and caught hold of her just at the moment she was about to precipitate herself from the window.

The poor woman appeared completely astonished; my shrieks reached her wandering senses. she threw herself upon her knees, and exclaimed—

"What was I about to do? Pardon me, O heavenly Father! I was surely mad; I had forgotten that I had sworn to her dying mother, that I would never abandon her. But I have suffered much, and to-day more than ever; surely it was God himself who sent this angel to prevent me from committing so great a crime. No, no; I will stay with you, my child; I will suffer, I will endure everything. I will, if it must be so, die of grief; but I will die near you, and looking at your sweet face, as I promised your mother, who is in heaven and now hears me."

This dreadful scene made so great an impression upon me—I was so struck with the despair Blondeau had manifested—that the first seeds of ingratitude toward her were uprooted, and for ever. I became as lovingly attentive to her as I had been in former years, to the evident chagrin of Mademoiselle de Maran, who at one time expected that she would deprive me of this affectionate and sincerely devoted friend.

In a short time afterwards, my aunt informed me that my cousin Ursula d'Orbeval, the daughter of my guardian, was about to come to reside with us; adding, that I was much prettier, much cleverer, much better dressed than she could be, and consequently that it would afford me great pleasure to make her sensible of my superiority.

Thus Mademoiselle de Maran endeavoured to deprive me of every sentiment of purity. Already the sweet and ingenuous joy of possessing a friend of my own age, was embittered by the after-thought, that I must create in her mind feelings of jealousy, envy, and necessarily of hatred.

I do not know whether you have remarked, my friend, that my aunt, with a singular sagacity, had, as I may say, formed two epochs of my youth; until I was eight years old, I had been the victim of terror, privations, and neglect: I was not yet ripe for other projects.

CHAPTER IX

URSULA.

A NEW era was now opening itself before me. Up to this time my feelings were but ill defined; I feared my aunt, but her wit amused me. Notwithstanding some proofs of coldness and forgetfulness, I loved my governess tenderly; but there did not exist between us any affinity, either of age or disposition.

When Ursula d'Orbeval arrived, I was so much alone in the world, and had formed such ecstatic dreams of prominent affection, that I at once felt grateful toward her who was to realise these soft hopes. I completely forgot the perfidious counsels of my aunt; instead of desiring to humiliate Ursula, I only thought of loving her.

She arrived at the Hotel de Maran the day after New Year's day; she was a year older than myself. By an extraordinary coincidence, her hair was black and her eyes blue; my eyes on the contrary were black, and I had light hair. We were about the same height. Ursula's features were far from being regular; but it is impossible to imagine a more interesting physiognomy, a sweeter or more amiable expression of countenance.

The first time I saw her, she was in mourning for her grandmother; her black dress only set off to more advantage the rosy whiteness of her skin; her whole appearance was so pleasing, that I threw my arms about her neck, calling her my sister.

I could not help weeping, but they were the sweetest tears I had ever shed. My cousin received my caresses with a touching grace. I led her to my room, where I placed at her disposal all the treasures of my toilette.

Ursula did not evince either awkward embarrassment or forward assurance. She told me, with much emotion, all she desired was my friendship; that she was almost an orphan, for her father treated her with great harshness.

I felt a host of new emotions springing up within me. I immediately conceived the happiness to be derived from devoting oneself to a person that one loved, and from protecting and defending her. I felt almost obliged to Ursula for being poor, for being almost friendless, because I was rich; because my heart was prepared to offer her that affection of which she was deprived.

As soon as I had a friend to love, I thought myself no longer a child; I considered myself a great woman, as the little girls say. I became very serious, very thoughtful. I was ashamed of my past love of finery; I said to Ursula, showing her, at the same time, my handsome dresses, and with supreme disdain—"All these were well enough before I had a friend."

As my cousin wore mourning, I wished to go into mourning also. This project kept me awake the whole of one night. In the morning, I, with great resolution, entered Mademoiselle de Maran's room.

"Aunt," said I, "I wish to be dressed in black, as Ursula is, and to wear it as long as she does."

"You are surely mad, my dear," replied my aunt, evincing much astonishment; "Ursula is in mourning, but you have no reason for being so."

"I can wear mourning for my mother," I rejoined, casting down my eyes sorrowfully.

My aunt laughed very heartily, saying, "Is she not amusing, with her funeral imaginings? Why, you wore mourning for your mother seven years ago; and that is quite sufficient."

"I wore it then without knowing why I wore it," I replied, feeling the tears starting from my eyes, for my aunt's loud laugh had wounded me painfully.

"Oh, Heaven! what droll ideas this child has!" rejoined Mademoiselle de Maran, laughing still more and chucking me under the chin. "Come, come, little simpleton, this singular caprice shall be indulged; that is, to-day you shall be dressed in black, but not in mourning—you shall have some beautiful silk dresses, while poor Ursula will only have woollen ones—that will enrage her terribly."

"I wish never to be dressed otherwise than my cousin, aunt."

"How! has it already gone so far?" exclaimed Mademoiselle de Maran, fixing upon me her piercing eyes; "this is even better than I anticipated. Well, well; be calm my dear; when once the mourning is over, you shall always be dressed like two sisters; you are rich enough to make a present every now and then of a handsome new dress to your cousin, who has not a penny."

"Aunt, you do not understand me," I replied impatiently; "as Ursula is poor, I wish to be dressed as she is, and not that she should be dressed as I am."

Mademoiselle de Maran looked at me again attentively, and then said, with her sarcastic tone, "Bless us! what is the matter with the girl to-day, that she has such superlative delicacy? It is perfectly affecting! quite a family complaint;" and then she added, speaking to herself, "Well, so much the better;" and again addressing me, continued, "Right, right; you cannot, my dear, treat Ursula too like a sister. It is with much satisfaction I see manifested in you evidences of great sensibility. So much the better; I really did not expect it; you have surprised my most sanguine hopes."

I left Mademoiselle de Maran's room with feelings of pride and happiness. I ran immediately to my governess, to inform her of the result of my conversation with my aunt.

Blondeau embraced me tenderly, but this time it was with tears of joy; she said to me, "Your good feelings have now returned to you: I think I hear your poor mother talking to me."

One would have imagined that some pause would have ensued in Mademoiselle de Maran's wicked schemes against me, but it was not so. Never, on the contrary, did she feel so certain of the blighting influence she meant to cast over both my present and future life. But I was then ignorant of what I have since learned, and I gave myself up joyfully to the delights of my exaggerated friendship for my cousin; she returned it with the most affectionate and grateful warmth.

In a few days after Ursula's arrival at the Hotel de Maran, she was in possession of all my secrets—all my thoughts. I related to her everything that had happened to me, excepting the horrid attempt of my governess to destroy herself. But it was with difficulty that I refrained from telling her that, also.

Although Ursula was a year older than I was, I was almost as forwardin

Ursula.

my studies. Our professors did not fail to prefer my exertions to hers, whether they really deserved the preference, or whether by so conducting themselves they thought to flatter my aunt—without knowing it, they thus rendered themselves accomplices in her secret designs.

Fearing to wound the self-love of Ursula by my successes, I did all I could to soften the superiority which was awarded me. I found a thousand reasons by which to explain the triumphs I obtained, to my own disadvantage;—sometimes it was, that our masters, to please Mademoiselle de Maran, gave me the first place; sometimes, that it was Ursula herself loving me so much, as to make blunders expressly to let me obtain the advantage over her.

I do not know whether our growing attachment was in opposition to the projects of Mademoiselle de Maran; but she devised a new scheme of tormenting me more cruelly than ever. Under the pretext of accustoming us to see the world little by little, she every now and then would desire us to come into the drawing-room early in the day. She received company always in the evening; but several of her most intimate acquaintances were in the habit of calling upon her before dinner.

My chagrin will be easily imagined, when for the first time I heard my aunt talking to strangers in the following terms after pointing to Ursula and me:—

"Could you believe that my niece, who is a year younger than Miss d'Orbeval, and who began her education much later, has applied herself so earnestly—has made such astonishing progress—that in every branch of study she has always the first mark? It is perfectly amazing; is it not? Generally, it is poor girls without fortune who study the most assiduously. Here, it is quite the contrary. Matilda is not satisfied with being superior to her cousin in riches and beauty—she wishes, also, to be superior to her in education. Poor dear little girl! that child is a real treasure; she is the perfect portrait of her mother."

And then, Mademoiselle de Maran overwhelmed me with her hypocritical caresses.

I thought my heart would break. I looked at Ursula with a suppliant air. The moment we were alone, I threw myself weeping into her arms, begging her to pardon the exaggerated praises with which my aunt afflicted me.

My cousin, who was also much agitated, tried to allay my vexation; she even laughed at it; and proved, by her tenderness, that she was not at all jealous of the advantages I possessed, nor wounded by the reproaches of Mademoiselle de Maran.

From that time, I did all I could to make Ursula keep the first place: but it was in vain that I made fault after fault—my lessons were always preferred to those of my cousin. One day, I resolved that I would not do anything, and that I would not learn a single lesson. By this mode, my companion was sure to have a better mark than myself.

Mademoiselle de Maran sent for us both into the drawing-room, where we found her with several other persons. After some little uninteresting conversation, my aunt called me to her, and then, addressing one of her friends, said—

"I know you will tell me that I am always repeating the same thing; but you must forgive an old woman's dotage, when she is speaking of what she loves tenderly. I see that you are laughing already: you guess that I am going to say something about Matilda. Well; it is certainly true that she has bewitched me, that I dote upon her. It is so, and I cannot help myself."

My aunt said this with an assumed tone of candour, which she always put on when about to utter something particularly malignant.

"Well, now," she continued, "compare Matilda with Ursula. And, by-the-bye, I must give a lesson to *Miss* d'Orbeval." Then turning toward my cousin, she said in a severe tone, "Miss d'Orbeval, you are poor; you have the advantage of all your cousin's masters; and you are so idle, that you allow Matilda—that angel of perfection—to fail in her duty, in order to let you gain the first place, which you have not assiduity enough to retain by your own exertions."

"But, aunt," exclaimed I, "Ursula knew nothing of it."

"Only see the good heart of that darling child! What generosity! she even defends her cousin," said my aunt, embracing me. And then, continuing her sermon to my cousin, who was blushing with vexation, she said, harshly, "Are you not ashamed to permit—to exact, perhaps—such sacrifices from this child?"

"But, madam," cried poor Ursula, "I assure you that I was ignorant."

"Very well, very well," said Mademoiselle de Maran; "I know what to think of all this." And she desired us to withdraw, after once more tenderly embracing me.

Her caresses disgusted me. I began to hate her again more than ever. I foresaw that her infernal wickedness wished to alienate my friend.

After this scene, I threw myself, sobbing, at Ursula's feet. The poor child thanked me for my assurance of friendship; but I could perceive that for a long time her feelings did not recover the shock they had received, which was rendered more poignant, from her being of a prouder and less communicative disposition than I was.

My great fear was, that my cousin should imagine me capable of having said something upon the subject to my aunt, or that I felt flattered by the praises she bestowed upon me. I resolved, therefore, to place myself in open hostility toward Mademoiselle de Maran, and, cost what it might, to irritate her against me, in order to prove to Ursula that I was no traitress, and that I wished to bear my share of my aunt's ill temper.

The question was, how to strike some great blow. My inapplication, my refusing to study, far from irritating my aunt against me, had drawn upon Ursula the most cruel reproaches. It was necessary to render myself guilty in some other way.

I cogitated over this great project for a long time. Blondeau has since told me that I appeared grave, pensive, preoccupied. My attentions to Ursula now became more affectionate than ever; but I took every possible precaution that she should not be accused of having been privy to my designs.

Among other famous projects, I had thought of breaking a magnificent vase of Sevres china, which the king, Louis XVIII., had given to my aunt, and which she highly valued. But this did not appear sufficient. This act might have been attributed to awkwardness or to imprudence. Something clearly premeditated—some open, frank, inexcusable piece of mischief, could alone suit my purpose.

At one time, I thought bravely of setting fire to the drawing-room curtains; but the consequences might have become dangerous to Ursula and Blondeau; and this, also, might be attributed to accident.

While combining these wicked designs, I did not feel the slightest scruples of conscience. I thought I was doing something very generous—very heroical. I felt the blood boiling in my veins, and that I was attaining to the sublimity of devotedness.

I was turning these great projects in my head, when one day, as fate would have it, my eyes fell upon Felix, my aunt's wolf-cur.

The spiteful animal had frequently bitten me, and I had often vowed to be revenged for it. The evening before, he had flown at Ursula and bitten her also; but I must acknowledge that, had he been the most gentle of the canine species, I should have selected him for my victim; his great crime was the extravagant attachment Mademoiselle de Maran had for him.

I knew how angry she was if any of the servants, by accident, made him yelp a little. For a moment, I was coward enough to tremble when I reflected upon the rage of Mademoiselle de Maran. I thought that she might kill me were I to hurt her dog. But my friendship for Ursula overbalanced every other consideration; I defied all consequences, and followed up my resolution.

I was alone in my aunt's sitting-room—Felix was comfortably stretched in his velvet niche—I could see his head only—I wished to hurt him, but did not know how to manage it, he was so savage, so cunning; and, moreover, a kick would not have sufficed, either for my revenge or my projects.

I cannot now, my friends, while retracing these details, avoid smiling at their puerility. I do not, however, remember ever having felt a more profound or more engrossing emotion than that which pervaded me when I was on the point of accomplishing my purpose.

Since that time I have often taken grave determinations, some of them even culpable ones; but, strange to say, I have never experienced such a feeling of dread, of hesitation, of anticipated remorse, as at the moment of committing a childish but wicked prank.

I acknowledge that it was a barbarous revenge I meditated against Felix;

my disposition was by no means cruel; it required all the fervour of my desire to reinstate myself with Ursula, to decide me to undertake such an atrocity.

I formed the abominable idea of heating a pair of tongs, and when I saw they were perfectly red-hot, I took them and advanced intrepidly toward my enemy.

As usual, he sprang out of his niche, barking, to catch hold of me; but I seized him so adroitly with the tongs by one of his pointed ears, that he howled most frightfully, and fell, without having either courage or strength enough to get back to his niche. For a moment, when I saw the ear of the poor animal smoking between the tongs, I had some feelings of remorse; but when I reflected on the happiness of being maltreated by my aunt, and in the presence of Ursula, I stifled every emotion of pity.

I remained standing heroically with the tongs in my hand, my victim rolling in agony at my feet.

Mademoiselle de Maran rushed into the room perfectly horror-struck; her *maitre d'hotel* followed her in almost as great alarm.

"Good heavens! what is the matter?" she exclaimed, throwing herself down by Felix; "what is the matter, my poor dog?"

Then, perceiving that his ear was completely burned, she raised her head and furiously said, "You stupid little thing, could not you take care of him, and prevent his going near the fire? Servien, Servien—quick—some cold water—some ice."

And then, with eyes starting with rage—her mouth foaming—forgetting her usual mode of acting, she seized me by the arm, and pinching me until it almost bled, she shrieked out,—"You could not—stupid animal that you are—you could not take care of him? you worthless creature!"

Mademoiselle de Maran's face was so awfully furious—she looked so diabolical, that for a moment I was undecided; I might allow her to believe that the burn Felix had received was accidental, but I soon overcame this cowardly weakness. I stepped away from her, and then showing her the tongs, which I still held, I said to her with proud and triumphant dignity, "I heated these tongs in the fire, and with them I burned the ear of Felix."

The last word had not passed my lips, when I felt the dry and bony fingers of my aunt upon my cheek; the blow was so violent that I was nearly falling backward.

Do not, in turn, smile at me, my friend, for, although the pain was severe —although my terror of my aunt was very great, I, at that moment, thought only of the *insult* I had received; I became almost purple with rage, and hardly knowing what I did, with all the strength I could muster, I threw the tongs at Mademoiselle de Maran.

Fate served me to my wish—the tongs struck the magnificent vase of Sevres china; the royal present was broken into a hundred pieces.

I remember to have heard you, my friend, analyse, with your just and truthful understanding, the emotions you experienced when, during a battle, the involuntary instinct of carnage excited and transported you. Well, my poor little head, when only ten years old, felt, by analogy, the same excitement.

This great victory—a dog maltreated and a vase destroyed—being accomplished, I hurried, insensible alike to the reproaches or the threats of my aunt, to the parlour, crying out, with all my strength, "Ursula! Ursula! come and see."

And then, doubtless, not being able to overcome the violence of the feelings which had agitated me, I fell into a deep swoon.

Imagine to yourself my joy, on recovering my senses, to find myself lying on my bed; my governess standing by my pillow, my cousin on her knees, holding my hands in hers.

I cannot express to you the ecstatic delight, the pride I felt, when I recalled my courageous conduct. All I dreaded was to hear that my aunt's anger had abated.

"Oh! my poor child!" cried Blondeau; "how could you, you who are so good, have the heart to do so much harm to that dog? I know that he is as spiteful as a demon; but still it was very cruel of you."

"And my aunt, my aunt—is she very angry?" I asked, impatiently.

"Is she angry? Heavenly Father!" ejaculated Blondeau; "she is so angry that she has had an hysterical fit. When she came to herself, the first thing she did, was to order that you should be put upon bread and water for ten days."

"Ah, Ursula!" I exclaimed, throwing my arms round my cousin's neck.

"But that is not all, Miss," sorrowfully added Blondeau; "your aunt is having a frock made for you of coarse grey linen, with a label upon it, and you are to be taken down to the drawing-room to-morrow with it on, when all the company is there."

"Ursula! Ursula! you hear; she is going to punish me too!" I cried out, beaming with joy, and embracing my cousin.

"Ah! now I understand," said my governess; and the excellent woman clasped her hands, looking at me with affectionate tenderness.

CHAPTER X.

FIRST COMMUNION.

In spite of all her subtlety and of her superior understanding, my aunt could not divine the motive for my revenge against Felix. She thought that I had acted merely from hatred, and from resentment against her dog.

I felt more and more delighted with the resolution I had shown. Ursula appeared much moved by this extravagant proof of my friendship; the ties of tender affection became more closely knit than ever.

I found Ursula's character much superior to mine. I was frequently passionate, wilful, and obstinate; my cousin, on the contrary, was always patient and perfectly calm; the expression of her eyes, though sometimes veiled in tears, was always soft and pleasing—they never flashed with lively emotions. She appeared destined to suffer.

Mademoiselle de Maran seemed gradually to forget the fault I had committed, and upon all occasions continued to exalt me at the expense of my cousin. The latter, comforted no doubt by the proofs of attachment she daily received from me, appeared insensible to my aunt's perfidious conduct.

One of the most serious events in the life of a young girl just emerging from childhood, *my first communion*, awakened within me new and serious reflections.

Mademoiselle de Maran did not practise any of the exterior ceremonies of religion. There was nothing, either in her language or habits, which revealed any sentiment of piety. She made us fulfil this solemn act, merely as a species of social obligation.

Unfortunately, the priest who was employed to give us religious instruction also fulfilled his heavenly task as though it were one of the forms of his profession. Confining himself to the letter of this holy ceremony, he did not explain its divine spirit to our young minds. From his teaching we were led to consider confession, not as an act of pious and beneficial confidence, to which a priest replies by affording consolation and pardon. To us, confession appeared to be a painful and dreadful avowal.

This priest, who came every day to prepare us for our communion, was the Abbé Dubourg. His manner was morose and harsh, and he always seemed in haste to terminate our conferences. His mode of teaching was dry, cold, and almost disdainful. In the pulpit he was a powerful orator, and had preached two seasons with great success. His most ardent desire was, I believe, to obtain a bishopric. Knowing the powerful influence of my aunt, he had, from calculation, accepted the charge of instructing my cousin and myself; a charge, which he no doubt regarded as unworthy of his knowledge and his eloquence.

Now that I can compare and appreciate facts, it appears to me that the instruction of the Abbé Dubourg did not differ much from those of other professors of religion; he gave us *lessons upon religion*, nothing more.

Alas! happy are the young females whose religious education has been developed, fostered by the tenderness of a mother—that sacred intercessor between her children and her God!

Notwithstanding my early privation, the religious instinct which existed, and which has existed in me, revealed to me, though indistinctly, the holiness of the act in which I was about to participate; only, that in my ignorance, I restricted to my personal feelings that majestic emblem offered to all humanity.

To approach the altar with Ursula, was, in my eyes, to take God to witness the holy engagement, to be to her a most Christian sister. I therefore concentrated in her that unbounded love, which religion teaches us to feel for all. Our communion was to me the holy and eternal consecration of our friendship.

I know, O God! that thy sacred law is for all created beings, and not for me only; but the Lord, in his mercy, will have looked with pity on two orphan children, who, in their ingenuous ardour, sealed the sisterly love they had vowed to each other, by one of the most imposing mysteries of religion.

From that day, the sacred bond which united us appeared indissoluble. We entered into the most extravagant projects; we were never to leave each other, never to marry, but to live as my aunt did. Brightened by friendship, this old monastic life appeared to us a most enviable existence.

The three or four years following our first communion, passed on without any events of importance.

My only vexation was, to find that, notwithstanding my entreaties, they would insist upon my being more elegantly dressed than my cousin; and to hear Mademoiselle de Maran say, in Ursula's presence, to the persons who came to visit her:

"It is perfectly incredible how a few years change the features. Here, for example, as a child, Matilda was merely pretty; well! as she grows up her beauty becomes so remarkable, that people turn round to look at her. Ursula, on the contrary, who had a charming little face, grows every day plainer; and with that so vulgar a look! so vulgar! while the physiognomy of her cousin has something so noble, so distinguished. But, alas! it cannot be helped," added Mademoiselle de Maran, addressing herself to Ursula with hypocritical resignation; "we must bow meekly to our fate, and make up our minds to it. Our side of the family have been completely robbed of our share both of grace and beauty. I have some right to speak of it, for am I not as ugly as the seven deadly sins, and as hump-backed as a sack of walnuts? but apropos," continued my aunt, talking to some of her complaisant friends, "do you not think that Ursula's shape is a little irregular, somewhat crooked? It is hardly perceptible, but still there is something; don't you think so? It is a sort of family memento from our great grandfather."

The friends of Mademoiselle de Maran did not fail to deny this, but very faintly; and my aunt exclaimed:

"How different from Matilda! She is shaped like a fairy—straight as an arrow, flexible as the willow; I do not know a young person who, in the same degree, unites majesty with grace, understanding with beauty. How can we help it, my poor Ursula! but as you have not all these preeminent qualities, you must console yourself, believe me, for your inferiority to your cousin, by admiring her; for admiration is the consolation of ugly persons. This will be the more generous on your part, because it is when you are compared with Matilda, that you are found ugly—just like myself; I never appeared so frightful as when in company with a young and lovely woman; but, as I have told you, I consoled myself by admiring her. And, besides, you have a thousand motives for loving Matilda; your friendship for her charms me, for it proves you are not ungrateful. Has not your cousin been magnificently charitable to you, in giving you a splendid education? Without her, you never could have had the advantages of such an education. Would your father have been able to give you professors who charge a louis a lesson? Again, I tell you, you act rightly to love, to bless your cousin. Thanks to her, you may now, from the knowledge and talents you have acquired, make one forget that your face is as disagreeable as hers is ravishingly beautiful."

There could be nothing more perfidious, more odious, or more dangerous, than these comparisons of our advantages and disadvantages; her blame and her praises were alike invidious.

I have never comprehended that false modesty, which consists in denying that we are beautiful. To be handsome is a fact, altogether independent of our will; to avow it is not self-pride, it is simply truth. On the contrary, I can understand the most scrupulous, the most diffident reserve, as regards talents or acquired advantages.

I believe, then, that at sixteen or seventeen years of age I was handsome; not so handsome as Mademoiselle de Maran pretended to think me, but yet sufficiently so, to justify the praises she bestowed upon me, had they not been so grossly exaggerated.

The same may be said of the blame she showered upon my cousin. She was tall, slight—perfectly well made; but what gave an appearance of truth to the malice of my aunt was, that Ursula, like many young persons who grow too fast, stooped a little. From this will be seen, with what art, with what connexion Mademoiselle de Maran worked out her treacherous plans.

She had followed up the same system from my infancy. Under a certain point of view, she spoke the truth; but her weapons cut both ways.

My aunt's design was to wound the vanity of Ursula painfully, and to excite my self-love to a ridiculous extent.

If false ideas, and even the most evident falsehoods, when incessantly repeated, at length produce a species of belief, what will be the effect produced by assertions founded apparently in truth?

My cousin at last actually believed, that she did not possess a single charm, a single accomplishment. If I assured her of the contrary, she thought my words were dictated by a feeling of affectionate pity, and she would say,

"Dear me! how good you are, to try to console me in this manner! But I do not deceive myself: what Mademoiselle de Maran says is true. You are as handsome as I am ugly: I have made up my mind to that."

I do not doubt that my cousin was sincere in what she said. Nothing could then have persuaded me that my aunt had gained her object; that she had succeeded in sowing the bitter seeds of jealousy in that pure and candid heart.

But, alas! the future will prove whether it was a crime or not—an inexcusable crime, on the part of Mademoiselle de Maran, who had fathomed the most secret and most gloomy recesses of the human heart—to run even the risk of awakening, in the soul of Ursula, the most baleful, most ferocious, and most implacable of human passions—ENVY.

The other danger—that of exciting my self-love to an immeasurable degree—was less culpable. For in acting thus, my aunt, without knowing it, rendered me great service: she put me on my guard for ever against exaggerated praise.

That which renders flattery dangerous is habit—is the feeling that we have been praised with tenderness, with tact, with truth. It is then that the mind gives itself up to the enjoyment of those affectionate words, which recall to us a time gone by, full of confidence, of love, and of sincerity. What irresistibly enchanting power would flattery possess, if it appeared to be the continuation of a mother's praises!

When I spoke to Ursula of the projects we had formed when we were little girls, such as that of never marrying—to which I desired to remain faithful—she would say, smiling scornfully, "It is all very well for me to remain single; I am poor—without accomplishments. But for you—rich, beautiful, charming, as you are—you will marry: you will be happy! All I ask is, that you will reserve for me a small place in your heart and in your house, that I may witness, and every day endeavour to add to your happiness."

Alas! fate sometimes mocks most bitterly at our wishes and our foresight.

I had already attained my seventeenth year. My cousin and I had hardly ever gone beyond the gates of the Hotel de Maran. Sometimes, indeed, we had been taken to the Comic theatre, or to the Italian opera, by my guardian, M. d'Orbeval; but we had not yet been presented in the world. It was very rarely, indeed, that we were allowed to remain in the drawing-room in the evening. My aunt was much more visited by gentlemen than by ladies; and the presence of young girls is always a restraint upon conversation.

Mademoiselle de Maran, no doubt thinking of my getting married, resolved, to her great regret, that she would take me into society at the beginning of 1830. She informed us of this determination, adding, as was her custom, something peculiarly disagreeable to Ursula:—

"It will not be only in my house that you will have to suffer from the comparisons made between you and Matilda, but in large companies—before everybody. Arm yourself with courage, my dear child: your first trial will soon be made. To-morrow morning I shall present you to the lady of the Austrian ambassador; and, on Wednesday, shall take you to a ball she gives. It is time that you should go into the world. I am old, and my health is bad. I should wish not to die before seeing my dear niece married; and, above all, as I wish her to be married."

CHAPTER XI.

COMING OUT.

WHEN Mademoiselle de Maran announced to us that she intended to carry us to the ball at the Austrian embassy, it put both Ursula and myself into a complete flurry. This was very natural; for we had lived so retired a life, that nothing could be more monotonous or more regular than our habits.

We took our lessons in the morning; in the afternoon, according to the season, we went out on foot with Madame Blondeau, or in the carriage with Mademoiselle de Maran: then we returned home; and, after changing our dress, sometimes remained in the drawing-room, working, until dinner-time.

Her friends used to visit her during this time. They were not very numerous, and all of them had been companions of my father during his emigration. Among them was M. de Versac, one of the principal officers in the king's household, who was a great favourite with us both. He was a man about seventy years of age; notwithstanding which, it would be difficult to find a man of a more lively wit, more youthful in manner, or more agreeable than he was. His appearance was still very elegant; he was an excellent horseman, and very seldom missed being present at the king's or dauphin's hunting-parties. He had always been particularly kind to me; and, to my great satisfaction, had often very good-naturedly taken Ursula's part, when my aunt was out of humour with her.

M. de Versac had an excellent disposition, but no consistency; the whole object of his life had been to please; and it would have been impossible for him to utter a word that was not gracious and flattering. I do not think he ever pronounced a word that could be considered as even approaching to censure.

I am now tempted to believe, that this imperturbable politeness covered, if not a profound disdain, at all events, a perfect indifference to everything and every person. But if this sentiment did exist in M. de Versac, it was difficult to discover it through the covering of urbanity—of exquisite urbanity—in which it was enveloped. I can never picture to myself M. de Versac, unless as smiling or flattering. He had the finest teeth in the world, a very engaging address, and these advantages, perhaps, had been the cause of his dandyism. I can fancy that I still see that face, beaming with nobleness and affected grace. His silvery hair was arranged with much coquettishness; and when, in the evening, his dress—which was always of an extreme elegance for his age—was set off by the blue ribbon and the jewel of the order of St. Esprit, it was impossible to conceive a more perfect type of the *ancienne noblesse*. He very seldom saw his wife, the Duchess de Versac, who, since the Restoration, had retired to the Abbey de Panthemont, where she passed her time in pious observances and works of charity.

You will not be surprised, my friend, that I should have given so minute a description of M. de Versac; for you are aware that I afterwards became nearly related to him.

One reason for our liking him so much was, that he gave us such enchanting accounts of the balls given at the court and by the Duchess of Berry; and, above all, of the fancy-dress quadrilles. M. de Versac was, *par excellence*, a man of pleasure; he spoke of these fetes, of these amusements of idle and luxurious life, with the most lively interest.

Among the other persons who formed the morning circle of Mademoiselle de Maran, there was one of the king's ministers. He was one of the best men in the world. He amused us very much, by his absent manner and by his insurmountable drowsiness; for he would frequently fall asleep in broad daylight.

But what delighted us more than all, was the arrival of Monsieur Bisson, a man of prodigious knowledge, and celebrated throughout Europe. He was considered one of the most eminent members of the Academy of Sciences. He was a tall, thin man—six feet high, at least. His head was very small, with the most good-natured face imaginable. His long neck issued from his white cravat, twisted like a rope, the bow of which was generally seen behind his head. Whatever might be the season, he wore a green spencer, trimmed with Astracan fur, over a black coat with large skirts. No inducement could prevail upon him to get into a carriage, so fearful was he of being upset: and in rainy or muddy weather, he used sometimes to enter the drawing-room in a most pitiable state. Although a man of uncommon wit, knowledge, and goodness of heart, he had one incurable mania—that of touching everything, putting everything out of its place, and often breaking everything he laid his hands on. My aunt used frequently to get furiously angry with him; but she was so fond of conversing upon the sciences with a man of M. Bisson's reputation, that it always ended by her being pacified. I shall never forget his taking up a beautiful snuff-box, ornamented with a valuable enamel painting, by Petitot, which my aunt had imprudently shown him while they were discussing one of the last reports read before the Academy of Sciences—I think by the Duke de Luynes—upon the Etruscan vases.

M. Bisson commenced, by turning the precious box between his fingers; the conversation became animated. Mademoiselle de Maran was severe in her attacks: rather than give up a point, she would deny the plainest evidence. The philosopher, exasperated by some false asseveration of my aunt, exclaimed, striking the chimney-piece impetuously, "I say no! no! no! a thousand times no! and once more, no! madam!" Each negative was accompanied by a tremendous blow given with the snuff-box upon the marble slab. My aunt was only informed of the destruction of her fragile box, by the cloud of snuff which issued from it, and the splinters of the enamel which were showered upon her.

"Ah! that horrid destroyer!" exclaimed she, angrily: "what has he broken for me now? as I live, my beautiful Petitot! Oh! the horrid man! For the love of God, sir, be quiet! you are throwing snuff into my eyes! you are blinding me! Once for all, I forbid you ever again to come into my house: do you understand me? My Petitot snuff-box! only the other day it was a rock crystal casket, a casket which cost me fifty louis, if you please, which he broke into a thousand pieces, while gesticulating with his long arms. Leave my house, I implore you, leave my house, I say! Your scientific conversations cost me too much, without taking into account that you have the indecency to enter my drawing-room as dirty as a thief, and to bring me the mud from every street in Paris."

"You may say what you please, madam," replied M. Bisson, much put out, "but I will never get into a carriage; of that I am resolved. I much prefer soiling your carpets to breaking my own neck." And the philosopher said not a word as to the breaking of the snuff-box.

"Hark you! M. Bison," said my aunt; "leave me in peace: you will really put me beside myself. Do me the friendship to go out of the house, and, above all, never come back again!"

"And where would you have me go? it is only half-past two o'clock, and I need not be at the Institute before half-past three," said M. Bisson, throwing himself into an arm-chair, and catching hold of a fire-screen, which he began to pull to pieces.

"How! where would I have you go?" cried Mademoiselle de Maran, much incensed; "is my house to become an asylum for idle members of the Institute? Oh, Heaven! what is he about? Well! Very well! he is doing all he can to break my fire-screen! But this is intolerable: so mischievous a man is a complete pest, a real scourge!" and Mademoiselle de Maran was obliged to snatch the screen out of his hand, already almost broken.

"It is astonishing, that people will not work more solidly in our day! this proceeds from pushing production to such extravagant lengths," said M. Bisson, with a meditative air; and taking up a small hearth-brush, he began stirring the fire with it, to the great annoyance of my aunt, who again flew into a tremendous passion.

Such scenes, frequently repeated, amused us very much; for M. Bisson always came back again after two or three days, entirely forgetful of what had passed, and Mademoiselle de Maran could not long be angry with him.

After these morning visits, we dined with Mademoiselle de Maran; she did not like to be restrained in anything, and, therefore, never invited any one. She kept an excellent table; she was a large eater, and had one fancy with which we were much disgusted.

Her maitre-d'hotel, Servien, helped her to everything that was put on the table, for she tasted everything;—and often—pardon me these details, my friend—helped herself with her fingers; and then allowed her dog, Felix, now grown very sickly, to eat off her own plate.

The length of time she remained at table was almost a torment to us. We then went into the drawing-room, where we remained until Mademoiselle de Maran was fast asleep in her arm-chair, a custom which she never failed to indulge in. Her servants had orders never to wake her, and to request visitors, who might by accident come early in the evening, to wait for her in another room.

Ursula and I then went to our own room about eight o'clock; and there we chatted, we read, or amused ourselves with music until tea-time.

We never were present at the evening parties; but few ladies visited my aunt, and those who did were mostly of her own age.

You will conceive, my friend, that accustomed as we were to this monotonous life, we were not a little dazzled by the perspective of balls and fetes which my aunt had opened to us.

Our first impression on receiving this information, was a joyous one; but, by degrees, reflection led us to melancholy considerations.

I was singularly agitated during the whole night that preceded the ball. As the expected day approached, I felt myself more and more sorrowful and depressed. I had never felt the happiness of enjoying the tender cares of a mother: I never regretted it more than at that moment.

Experience has since proved to me that my instinct did not deceive me; it is, above all, when we are about entering the world, that the protecting and imposing solicitude of a mother is indispensable.

Everybody knows that the public appearance of a young girl at balls and fetes, from which the usages of society have, during her education, kept her aloof, encourages and authorises, if I may use the expression, the pretensions of those who may wish to seek her hand.

Whether it be rightly so or not, there is so general a belief in the sagacity of a mother's heart, that certain pretenders, who are either unworthy or little likely to succeed, dread to encounter that maternal penetration, which is at once so careful and so distrustful.

When, on the contrary, a young girl is an orphan, let the affection of the friends who surround her be what it may, it is believed, it is known, that she is more isolated, less protected; she then becomes, particularly should she be rich, a species of prey, or conquest, if you will, to which every adventurer thinks he may pretend.

Without being able fully to comprehend the painful agitation which kept me awake the greater part of the night, I had, as it were, a vague presentiment of these considerations: I felt shocked and almost irritated at the idea, that strangers were about to scrutinise me—to pass their comments upon me; to compute my fortune, inquire into my family, and class me in the catalogue of *matches* either more or less advantageous. It appeared to me, that I should not have felt any of these scruples had I been accompanied by my mother.

There was another consideration which annoyed me, I may almost say afflicted me. I was certainly very far from participating in the prejudices of my aunt with regard to my cousin; but, by dint of hearing Mademoiselle de Maran so repeatedly tell Ursula that she was ugly, and without accomplishments, I had begun to fear that the world might confirm my aunt's judgment, and that my friend would perceive that she stood low in its estimation.

I trembled lest, when once launched into the great world, Ursula, notwithstanding the sweetness of her disposition and her habitual resignation, might envy me the frivolous advantages of which she was deprived, and that her jealousy might perhaps increase to a more bitter feeling.

Her self-love had never been wounded, excepting in the presence of some few friends. What might be her feelings were she, in general society, to meet with cruel and disdainful indifference!

I can assure you, my friend, that this anticipation afflicted me to a great degree, so precious did I consider the love of Ursula. Moreover, without having said a word to her upon the subject, I had thought seriously of dividing my fortune with her. This was not one of those juvenile exaggerations of feeling, as soon forgotten as conceived; it was a firmly-adopted resolution: and that I might be the more certain of effecting it, I did not mention it to my aunt, being determined to have this gift inserted as the first clause in my marriage contract.

The ball-day at length arrived. In spite of her ugliness, and of her carelessness as to her own dress, Mademoiselle de Maran possessed exquisite taste; her constant habit of criticising others, her hatred of all that was young and beautiful, had rendered her so difficult to please, that what she approved could not be otherwise than perfect.

She had two beautiful dresses made for Ursula and myself, and precisely similar. I have often wondered, how it was that my aunt was generous enough not to muffle me up in some antiquated garment, and head-dress in bad taste; she might easily have done this, and it would have held me up to public ridicule for a long time. The first impression which the world receives is often indelible; but a petty revenge was unworthy of my aunt; her revenge took a higher range.

Did I not fear to derange the order of events in stating to you here facts which I only ascertained much later, you would perceive that I was, even at that epoch in my life, almost enveloped in the artful snares which the hatred of Mademoiselle de Maran had laid for me, and with a calculating foresight that evinced a very profound and fatal knowledge of the human heart.

CHAPTER XII.

THE BALL.

URSULA and I were talking, all the morning, of the great events which the evening was to produce. I found her much dispirited, having seemingly lost all self-confidence, and determined not to go to the ball. She told me she had been weeping all night, and yet her face was neither pale nor careworn; but a charming expression of melancholy overspread her features.

I see her now, holding down her head, her forehead hid by her dark-brown tresses; almost sinking to the earth, her hands crossed upon her lap, and sighing piteously.

"Ursula, Ursula, my sister!" said I to her, tenderly embracing her; "take courage, I implore you; do not allow these terrors to take such hold of you. Am I not with you? as ignorant as you are of this world we are about to enter, and of which, like children, we are, I am sure, more fearful than we need be? No one will notice us, and by degrees we shall get accustomed to it. Always side by side, it will be a happiness to communicate each other's observations. Well! supposing that we should be a little awkward, a little embarrassed at first; we shall, in our turn, soon have some mischievous remarks to make on others."

Ursula smiled, and pressing my hands affectionately, replied:

"Pardon me, Matilda; but you cannot conceive my terror of the world. I feel that I shall never accustom myself to it. This is not childishness; it is conscience, it is duty: when persons are, like me, poor and without personal advantages, they should not push themselves forward; they should remain in the shade, and not expose themselves to disdain. You, happily, possess all that is necessary to shine, to excel, in the world. Go without me; I will await your return; I shall be so happy to hear you relate your triumphs. I shall see these magnificent fetes through your eyes—that will suffice me;" and then smiling gracefully, she continued, "I shall be your Cinderella—not the Cinderella of the fairy tale, unhappy and forgotten—but a voluntary Cinderella; happy to see you lovely and admired. Yes; when you shall return from the ball, tired out with pleasure, surfeited with flattery, you will be welcomed by me with a look of tender anxiety, and you shall find repose after your conquests in the serenity of my friendship."

It was at that moment, my friend, that you should have seen and heard Ursula; and you would have thought her not only lovely, but enchanting, notwithstanding the irregularity of her features.

Her touching voice had so pure, so soft a tone, her blue eyes were so sweetly expressive, that she was irresistibly fascinating.

"Ursula!" I exclaimed, "how is it possible you can feel such want of confidence in yourself, when you can speak, can look as you do now? I, your sister! I, who have never left you; I, who ought to be accustomed to your voice, to your looks—I think you at this moment lovely; and lovely to such a degree, that, were it possible, I should be jealous of you. You do not know yourself. Believe me, then, in spite of all the malicious remarks of Mademoiselle de Maran, in spite of your own misgivings, you are enchanting. Think you, that your sister is capable of deceiving you? Come, Ursula, my friend, courage; let us mutually sustain each other; let us for once be brave, and encounter this great day. We shall, perhaps, laugh at our silly terrors; but once for all, I tell you, that if you will not accompany me to the ball, I will not go alone."

"Matilda, I implore you! do not insist upon it."

"Ursula, in my turn, I implore you."

"I cannot."

"Ursula, this is not well of you. You well know my aunt will reprove you; she will say that you refused to go merely to prevent me. You know her; you know how miserable it makes me when I hear her unjustly scolding you. Well, then! do you wish to make me suffer? Ursula, my sister! to refuse me will be to tell me that I am indifferent to your sufferings, and I do not merit that reproach."

"Matilda! ah! what have you said?" exclaimed my cousin; "now I can hesitate no longer: I will go with you."

The nearer the time approached, the more apprehensive I became; but not for myself so much as for Ursula. Notwithstanding my apparent confidence, I did not know whether she would appear to advantage in her ball-dress. That I might form a just idea of her appearance, I avoided going to her room to see her dressing; and when I was ready, I went down to the drawing-room.

I have no longer any pretensions, my friend; my youthful beauty, and youth itself, are so far distant from me—I now so little resemble what I then was, that I can speak of Matilda at seventeen years of age, as of a stranger; moreover, there is courage, modesty, and humility, in saying, "I *was* once handsome."

Figure to yourself, then, your friend about ten years ago, in the flower of her youth; her light hair dressed in bandeaux and ornamented with a branch of rose-coloured heath, wearing a frock of plain white crape, trimmed only with three large bouquets of natural heath, similar to those in her hair. The Duchess d'Angouleme had had the extreme goodness to select these rare flowers, imported from the Cape, and kept in her green-house at Meudon, and had sent them to Mademoiselle de Maran.

I was particularly well made. M. de Versac paid me a compliment, I believe, as I was drawing on my gloves, on the roundness of my arm. As to my feet and hands, they are the only things of which I may not speak, for they have not changed by years.

Mademoiselle de Maran must also have thought that I looked well, perhaps even too well; for on seeing me, she could not help knitting her brows, notwithstanding her habit of praising me so outrageously. She, however, restrained her feelings, and said to M. de Versac, "Is she not positively charming and beautiful as a star, this dear child?"

"Fortunately, she has sufficient understanding to permit one to talk of her beauty without fearing the consequences," replied M. de Versac, smiling. Mademoiselle de Maran wore, as usual, a dress of grey silk; but for the first time she had on a very plain cap, ornamented with a bunch of yellow flowers.

I anxiously awaited Ursula's coming in; at last she made her appearance.

Do not think that I exaggerate, my friend, when I tell you that I hardly recognised her, so much more lovely did she appear. Her head-dress was ravishingly beautiful. Her splendid brown hair, separated in the middle of her forehead, fell in large ringlets on each side her face and almost reached her shoulders; her pale cheeks, suffused with a slight rosy tint, her downcast eyes, her sweet though sorrowful smile, and even her rather languid air, made her appear the personification of pensive melancholy—an expression never to be attained by faces that are regularly handsome.

When reading Hamlet, I have always conjured up the remembrance of Ursula, as I saw her on the night of the ball, to represent Ophelia.

Instead of stooping as she habitually did, my cousin proved, by her graceful movements, that her shape was faultless; she only bent forward her head, a little, *like a flower swaying on its stalk;* and this gave to her neck a slight but extremely elegant curve, which added still more to the charm of her deportment. In her features was to be traced a mournful feeling which, being gently restrained, appeared to mingle in the gaieties of the world without participating in them. The look of Ursula, almost supplicating, seemed to ask forgiveness for remaining indifferent to those pleasures, to which a painful preoccupation rendered her insensbile. I had been accustomed to see Ursula suffering and resigned; but the night of the ball, she represented, if I may use the expression, deep suffering and resignation *poetized*, and decked out for a ball. But, alas!

epigrammatic sentences will not revenge me for the bitter evils which that false friend brought upon me. Could I imagine so much dissimulation—and yet, no! no! it is not she I must accuse; it is Mademoiselle de Maran, whose treacherous raillery——

But these grievous discoveries will be but too soon brought to light. To return to my story.

I hastened toward Ursula to take her by the hand, and to congratulate her on her charming appearance.

M. de Versac exclaimed, " Pray, remain a moment in that position, holding each other's hand! What an adorable contrast! You, Matilda, beautiful, ravishing, your face beaming with happiness and grace, you shall be the queen of our festivities; and you, Ursula, the touching image of melancholy, who smiles while tears suffuse her eyes."

Mademoiselle de Maran laughed very heartily, and said to M. de Versac, " Why should you stop while in so poetic a vein, and not pass on to a comparison between the glorious rose and the humble violet? Come you from the borders of the *Tendre* and the Lignon, most excellent Alcander? Pray, do not disturb me with your contrasts. The rose has a rent-roll of nearly a hundred thousand francs a year, and the poor violet has not a penny; that is the reason why the one raises her head, and why the other stoops down hers so modestly."

The comparison of M. de Versac, the cutting remark of Mademoiselle de Maran, and perhaps, also, the sight of Ursula, whom I had never seen looking so handsome, inspired me, for the first time in my life, with a feeling of jealousy which soon changed into anger and self-reproach.

Not doubting the truth of what my aunt had said, I fancied I might have assumed the air of proud satisfaction which wealth often gives; and I envied the interesting modesty of Ursula, which threw over her features so touching a charm.

Doubtless this evil thought was not of long duration; doubtless I felt an inward shame on reflecting that I had so little generosity as to be jealous of my cousin, of my dearest friend, for the interest which her poverty inspired. Doubtless, had it not been for the malicious observation made by my aunt, I should never have experienced this feeling of envy, excusable perhaps, because being rich, I envied one who was poor. Nevertheless, this impression left a bitter sting in my bosom.

Just as we were setting off, M. de Versac said to Mademoiselle de Maran, "How forgetful I have been! Gontran arrived from England this morning, and I omitted to tell you of it."

"Your nephew! well, then, we have a partner quite at hand for these young girls."

I looked at Ursula with astonishment; neither M. de Versac nor Mademoiselle de Maran had ever mentioned the name of their nephew. We were about getting into the carriage, when one of my aunt's most intimate friends begged her to grant him a few moments' conversation upon a very important matter. Mademoiselle de Maran led him into a library. M. de Versac took up the evening paper.

Under pretext of arranging my head-dress, I went with Ursula into Mademoiselle de Maran's room; and there throwing myself into her arms, I frankly avowed to her the jealous feelings I had for a moment entertained, and with tears in my eyes begged her to pardon them. Ursula also was moved even to tears by my frankness, and reassured me by the tenderest protestations. I returned, therefore, to the drawing-room, with my mind perfectly calm and at ease; promising myself, even as I had told Ursula, to try not to look like an heiress.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE PRESENTATION.

As I entered the first apartment of the embassy, accompanied by Monsieur de Versac, I felt my resolution failing me; and it required all the gracious kindness of the Austrian ambassadress's reception, to restore in some degree my courage.

Mademoiselle de Maran gave her arm to Ursula.

Now then I was enabled, more than ever, to appreciate the extent of my aunt's influence; for the most agreeable and fashionable woman of the day could not possibly have been more surrounded and courted, than was Mademoiselle de Maran on this occasion; yet she received attentions the most reverential, homage the most assiduous, with an air of haughtiness, or of patronising affability, that was almost disdainful.

We moved toward the end of the room, where they were dancing, and Monsieur de Versac, on whose arm I was leaning, pointed out to me different persons of distinction who were present, and told me their names; when suddenly, as we stopped for a moment near one of the doors of the gallery, I heard the following words exchanged between two persons, neither of whom was in sight at the time:

"Well! you know, Lancry has just returned from England. I have just seen him; he is more brilliant than ever."

"Indeed! has he come back?" replied the other. "The Duchess de Richeville must be very glad, for she was even more than sorrowful at his departure, poor thing!"

By a very sudden movement on the part of M. de Versac, as if to force a passage for us through the crowd, I perceived, readily enough, that he wished to distract my attention from this conversation, which it was not desirable that I should hear, and of which his own nephew, Gontran de Lancry, was the hero. I did not, at the time, attach any importance to the incident, and followed M. de Versac as if I had not heard what was passing.

Before coming to the ball, I had imagined that I should have been embarrassed by everything; that I should not have known how to bear myself—how to move—nay, even how to look around me; but, as soon as the first uneasiness had passed away, once in the midst of that society to which I belonged, I felt myself, not reassured, for that is not the word, but, as it were, in my own proper place. We are rarely, if ever, ill at ease or intimidated, except on being brought into a circle very much above, or very much below, that to which we belong; so that I very soon recovered my powers of observation.

As we entered the great gallery, which was occupied by the dancers, I was almost dazzled by the splendour and magnificence of the dresses. Madame de Mirecourt, a friend of my aunt, who was chaperoning a young lady lately married, offered to make room for us by her side; and Mademoiselle de Maran assenting, Ursula and myself sat down between Mademoiselle de Mirecourt and my aunt. M. de Versac left us to go and find his nephew, whom he was desirous of presenting to us.

"Well!" said I, in a whisper, to my cousin, "after all this is not very terrible; don't you find that you gain courage?"

"No!" answered Ursula, "I cannot overcome my timidity; I actually tremble, and can scarcely see what is going on around me."

"As for me," said I gaily, and to give her a little courage, "I confess that I think the whole scene charming: what a pity that you cannot enjoy it! Decidedly, a ball is a very pretty thing."

As I said these words with a *naive* expression of pleasure, my aunt, by whose side I was sitting, burst into a violent fit of laughter. Several persons who were standing up before us, during the intervals of a waltz, turned about, and Madame de Mirecourt, who was on the other side of Ursula, leaned over, and said to my aunt,

"What is the matter with you, that you laugh so strangely?"

"Who in the world can help it, with a little quiz like this?" said Mademoiselle de Maran, pointing me out to her friend. "If you could only hear what witty wicked observations she is making—it is enough to kill one. Take care of yourself, I advise you, for she carries away a piece at every bite!" Then turning about to me, my aunt added in a lower voice, and in a tone of affectionate reproof, "Be so kind, Mademoiselle, as not to be quite so witty. People will say that it is I who have made you so sarcastic."

All this was said in a low voice, but in such a manner that all the persons who were round us could hear every word. I looked at my aunt, in the most profound astonishment: and Ursula, bending down to whisper in my ear, asked me what I said so funny to my aunt, and what absurdity had called me forth.

"None at all!" I replied, "and I do not understand a single word of what she has been saying to me."

And now, my friend, here is the key of this enigma. My aunt had determined to make for me that reputation of being satirical, which you yourself believed, and which was for a long time the strongest cause of your prejudice against me; and, thanks to the treacherous speech of Mademoiselle de Maran, several persons who had been standing before us believed that they were the objects of my sarcastic wit; one of them, the kind and charming Lady Fitzallan, told me so afterward, herself.

I was making my first appearance in the world, and for several reasons, which you can understand, was sure to be somewhat particularly observed; the remark, therefore, of my aunt, upon my ill-natured witticisms, could not fail to circulate, and, in fact, did circulate in an instant.

A woman cannot, possibly, gain a more fatal reputation than that of being even most brilliantly satirical—the fools are afraid of her, and slander her; the clever envy her; and, worst of all, the generous and good avoid her—so that, within one brief half-hour of my arrival in the ball-room, I had already enemies. Lady Fitzallan has told me since, that my ill-natured wit was, for the time, the news of the ball-room. Every one was talking of the bitter, biting irony of Mademoiselle Matilda de Maran; for so I was called, in order to distinguish me from my aunt. No one, it is true, had heard one of my sarcasms; but, nevertheless, as is sure to be the case, the whole world was talking of them. My aunt, however, was resolved to complete her work; and, during another pause in the waltzing, a few minutes after, she spoke quite loud to Ursula—

"Good heavens! my poor child, do throw aside that serious melancholy air of yours: do try to be a little in keeping with your time of life, if you can; what wild timidity this is!"

These words of my aunt, heard, as they were, by every one, repeated and made the subject of a hundred comments, established positively as a fact, that I was no less headstrong, satirical, and bitter, than my cousin was timid, sensitive, and given to reflection. You know the world, my friend; you know how rarely it gives up its first impressions; and you will readily understand all the effect which those few words of my aunt had on my destiny. Alas! must I confess it? my own inexperience, my own vanity, increased yet further the extent of the injury they had done me. At a later day, I bitterly deplored the reputation I had acquired for sarcastic wit; but, at first, I was so weak as to be almost flattered, almost proud of it. I believed already that I was a beauty, and I imagined that irony was, as it were, a pledge for talent.

As soon as the waltz was ended, M. de Versac came up to my aunt with his nephew, the Viscount Gontran de Lancry. I confess it, I could not avoid being struck almost motionless with surprise at the sight of M. de Lancry. He was about thirty years of age, and it would have been difficult indeed to find a man more perfectly agreeable in his appearance, or one whose person was more pleasing and attractive. You will, I think, my friend, be surprised, and that not a little, at the easy unconcern with which I am about to speak to you of M. de Lancry. Even as I write these lines, I am myself almost astonished at finding myself able, so clearly, to recall my first impressions, so thoroughly to sever them from the feelings to which they gave place. You can judge of my self-command, or, rather, of the sad state of my affections, even from the cold-blooded calmness with which I proceed to paint to you De Lancry, as I then saw him.

Alas! perhaps I may not long maintain this quiet self-controul; perhaps, ere long, these memories, at the same time too cherished and too painful, will cause my heart to tremble with emotions too sorrowful to be subdued, as it will tell of facts——But hold! I will endeavour to recall the emotions which I then experienced. Smile not if some of the details seem puerile, for I was very young, and in the house of Mademoiselle de Maran I had seen no one who could be compared to M. de Lancry.

Having been a royal page in his early youth, he had served, and that very valiantly, in the Spanish war; after this, having been attached as *chevalier d'honneur* to one of the great embassies, he had abandoned the profession of arms, and, thanks to the kindness of the king, and to the protection of M. de Versac, had been appointed gentleman of the bedchamber to his majesty. My first interview with him at the ball of the Austrian embassy comes back very forcibly upon my memory. There had been a great levee at the castle, and many gentlemen of the court had come to the ball in uniform; among the rest, M. de Lancry had been at the Tuileries, and wore his glittering dress of office, with the red ribbon and commander's cross of the legion of honour round his neck, and, beside it, the broad medal of some foreign order. M. de Lancry did not exceed the middle height of men, but his figure was of rare proportions; and his features, perfectly chiselled according to my aunt's opinion, who in this instance judged but truly, were those of a young Athenian, kindled with all the animated wit and grace of the Parisian world. It was, she said, the absolute ideal of male beauty; his hair was of a rich soft chestnut, his eyes hazel, his teeth exquisitely regular, his hand and foot such that a woman might have envied them—and, in a word, though he was thirty years old, no one would have taken him to be more than twenty-five.

These natural advantages, heightened by those honourable decorations which are rarely conceded but to years more advanced than his, and which always appear at least to be the insignia of merit, of course combined to render M. de Lancry more than usually conspicuous.

As he approached my aunt, she put out her hand, saying, "How do you do to-night, my dear Gontran? Your uncle has but this minute told me of your return from London. Well, what have you been doing with yourself in that dear country?"

M. de Lancry smiled, drew close to Mademoiselle de Maran, and whispered some words to her so low, that I could not even catch the sounds.

"Will you be quiet?" said my aunt—"for shame! but happily people may say anything to an old woman like me. I shall only impose upon you the penalty for your impudence of dancing with these little girls." And turning toward me, she said to M. de Lancry, with an air of dignity which became no one better than my aunt, when she thought fit to wear it, "My niece, Mademoiselle Matilda de Maran." The gentleman bowed gracefully.

"Mademoiselle Ursula d'Orbeval, our cousin," added my aunt, with a gesture so slight as to be hardly perceptible, and yet sufficiently pointed to show that she wished to establish a distinction in my favour between myself and my friend.

M. de Lancry bowed again, but, as he did so, I dropped my eyes, for I felt that I was blushing very deeply; and as my hand chanced to be near that of Ursula, I pressed it timidly.

"Will you do me the honour of dancing the first country dance with me?" said M. de Lancry, addressing the words to me.

"With pleasure," I replied, casting an uneasy glance toward Mademoiselle de Maran. He bowed his thanks, and turning toward Ursula, "And may I hope, he said, "that you, Mademoiselle, will do me the same favour for the second?"

"Certainly, sir," answered Ursula with a sigh; and dropping her head, she darted a melancholy glance toward M. de Lancry, through her long lashes.

But at this moment an extremely pretty woman, glittering with jewels, stepped before us, leaning upon the arm of a young English colonel. She was a dark brunette in complexion, with a figure which, though extremely slender, was exquisitely graceful. She had a proud and even bold expression on her fine features, and her large eyes, of piercing blackness, were placed somewhat too near to her nose, which was keenly aquiline; but, altogether, she was a very striking person.

"You are exceedingly forgetful of your friends, M. de Lancry," she said in a soft, harmonious voice. De Lancry turned round quickly, and, scarcely able to conceal his embarrassment, answered with a profound inclination, "I do not deserve your reproach, flattering as it is, Madame la Duchesse; for I have only this morning arrived from London, and promise myself the honour of waiting on you to-morrow."

How true it is, my friend, that there are certain presentiments which scarce ever err! The instant I heard M. de Lancry address that woman as Madame la Duchesse, I was convinced beyond a doubt that she was that Madame de Richeville, whose name I had heard so rashly coupled to that of De Lancry. The band began at this moment to play the prelude of the country dance.

"You see how forgiving I can be," said the duchesse to M. de Lancry. "I not only pardon your forgetfulness, but I even tell you in confidence that I am not engaged for this country dance. There! am I not too generous?"

M. de Lancry looked at her again, with an expression of astonishment that made him appear as one thunderstruck, and replied with an air of evident constraint,

"And am not I even too happy, who might have danced this country dance with you, and am about to have the pleasure of dancing it with Mademoiselle de Maran, whose hand I have this instant had the honour of requesting."

Madame de Richeville, thinking that M. de Lancry was talking of my aunt, and that he spoke in jest, burst into a fit of laughter, and cried aloud—

"What! you have come from England to dance with Mademoiselle de Maran! Is there, then, an eccentric club in London, and do you wish to distinguish yourself as one of the most dauntless members?"

M. de Lancry hastened to interrupt Mademoiselle de Richeville, who was exceedingly short-sighted, and had not perceived that my aunt was present.

"It is with Mademoiselle *Matilda* de Maran," he said, bowing slightly toward me, and laying some stress on the name Matilda, "that I am to have the honour of dancing immediately."

"Ah! I understand—they have brought her out then already," said the duchess; and with the word she raised her little tortoise-shell spy-glass, and examined me with a scrutiny which appeared anything but kindly meant.

I was in agony.

My aunt had not missed a word of this conversation, and seeing the eye-glass of the duchess still directed upon me, she seemed to be annoyed, and said to her, without rising from her seat, in a harsh and haughty voice, "Is not my niece charming, duchess?"

"Charming, madam," replied the duchess drily, as she lowered her eye-glass; and drawing near to Mademoiselle de Maran, she dropped her a half courtesy, at the same time extremely graceful and exceedingly dignified.

I have since that time learned, that my aunt and the duchess detested one another; and thence I have been able to explain to myself the attention with which the company watched those well-matched and formidable rivals.

"Well, I am quite delighted, madam," my aunt resumed, "on this dear little girl's account, that you think her charming; the approbation of such a lady as you are, madam, can bring nothing except good fortune to a young person making her *entree* in the world—it is, as it were, an omen. But notwithstanding, I can scarce believe, madam, that my niece will ever be able to arrive at excellence such as yours."

There was indeed, to all appearance, nothing but what was very simple in these words, nothing but what was exceedingly polite—and yet I knew too well the accents of my aunt, not to discover that there was some malicious meaning lurking beneath the guise of those fair words. In fact, as I raised my eyes to the face of Madame de Richeville, and of the ladies who stood around us, I could perceive that the former was affecting to be perfectly at her ease, while everybody else was exceedingly embarrassed.

You, my friend, must have often met Madame de Richeville in the world, and know unquestionably what people said about her, exaggerating the levity of her conduct even to the extent of the most odious accusations. It was said, that were it not for the illustrious name she bore, were it not for the grandeur and great connexions of her house, and lastly, were it not for her immense fortune, the world would hardly have closed its eyes upon her faults—faults which had long since compelled her husband to insist on a separation. She was, however, perfectly well received in the best society, to which she belonged; with this exception only, that on the reception days at the castle, Madame la Dauphine was thought to manifest her disapprobation, by the icy coldness of her manner in addressing her.

You can understand, therefore, the peculiar bitterness of Mademoiselle de Maran's attack, who now desiring to add a finishing stroke to the advantage she had already gained, cried out—"But, heavens! what beautiful rubies you have got there, madam! Are not they those which belonged to that exemplary dowager Duchess de Richeville? What a pity it is that she cannot see you wear them! and, above all things, how much pleasure it must give M. de Richeville, to see you adorned with the gems of his noble mother!"

To understand all the cruelty of Mademoiselle de Maran's remark, you must know that, according to an accredited rumour, of which I have lately learned the utter falsity, M. de Richeville had given that set of family jewels to his wife on the occasion of their marriage; and that, on his separation from the duchess, he had so much delicacy as not to require them at her hands—a degree of delicacy which she would have little imitated, had she continued to adorn herself with them.

All those who heard what passed seemed to be overcome by the spite of Mademoiselle de Maran; but Madame de Richeville had so much self-con troul, that she not only dissembled her indignation, but cast a glance fuller of sweetness than of dignity, upon my aunt, as she replied in an affectionate tone—

"You overwhelm me with your goodness, madam; would that I could prove to you my gratitude for the marks of interest which you have displayed toward me! And now that I think of it, I can tell you some news that will, I trust, give you much pleasure. One of your friends is about to arrive here from Italy, where he has been for a long time, no person knowing what had become of him. But I see that you are becoming uneasy, and I will not overstrain your curiosity. Well; after all," continued Madame de Richeville, with an air of kind and courteous confidence—"Well; after all, what will you think, if I tell you that M. de Mortagne will be here in a few days? Yes! I have received tidings of him from Venice. People say that there was a terrible romance connected with his disappearance. Confess, madam; confess, that you are very much surprised, and yet more enchanted, at this his return!"

Madame de Richeville launched these last words, keen as the stroke of a dagger, against Mademoiselle de Maran; and then, hearing the music striking up a country dance, she said gaily to M. de Lancry, "I offer you a waltz, to make amends for the country dance which you have refused to dance with me." And turning to the English colonel, on whose arm she was leaning, "Let us go up," she said, "into the little gallery. I should like to see this country dance."

Never before had I seen Mademoiselle de Maran moved. Yet she was agitated much, even at the first words of Madame de Richeville; but when that lady uttered the sentence, "*M. de Mortagne will be here in a few days,*" my aunt grew pale as death, and appeared quite overpowered—to the great surprise of those who knew the audacity of her nature, and were ignorant of the hidden meaning of Madame de Richeville's answer.

The country dance began; and M. de Lancry had the good taste to spare me those compliments which are always so embarrassing to a young girl. He was extremely simple, and, though very merry, I was not the least satirical. He spoke to me of Mademoiselle de Maran with affectionate respect, of M. de Versac with tenderness. He said that he thought Ursula's expression one of the most interesting he had ever seen, and asked me, what could be the great grief which rendered her so melancholy. It seemed, moreover, that he was a good musician, and we talked about music. I preferred the masters of the German school, he the Italian; and he brought so much gay good-humour into the discussion, that by the end of the country dance I was not afraid of him at all. After he had led me back to my seat, and had put Ursula in mind of her promise, he moved away to pay his compliments to some other ladies whom he knew.

"Good Heaven!" said Ursula to me, "how could you dare to talk so so much? I really admired you."

"Oh!" said I, "I was a good deal afraid at first; but, by degrees, I gained courage: and then, M. de Lancry appears to be so kind and natural. You will see for yourself."

"Oh! I shall scarcely dare to answer him," said Ursula timidly.

"You are very foolish, then. He thinks you lovely; he told me so just now; and perhaps it was that which made me find him so agreeable."

I was not able to continue my conversation with Ursula any longer, for all the gentlemen who knew my aunt came up to talk with her; and she presented us to all those who were of an age to like dancing; and Ursula and I were very soon engaged for a great many sets. Indeed, I was so much occupied with dancing, that although I wished to do so, I had scarce time to think about the last words of Madame de Richeville concerning M. de Mortagne. I had always preserved toward him a lively sentiment of gratitude, for in my childhood he had been my earliest protector; and yet, for eight or nine years, his name had been scarcely ever mentioned in my aunt's house. I remembered then only, that I had several times heard that no tidings of him had been received: but his mode of life was so strange, and it was known that he had such a rage for travelling, that I scarcely had thought it surprising. The only thing, indeed, which appeared wonderful to me, was the almost stunning effect which the news of his return produced on Mademoiselle de Maran.

From these reflections I was aroused by the sound of a waltz. Among the couples who were soon whirled away in its mazy round, I saw M. de Lancry and the Duchesse de Richeville. She had a lovely figure, and, as he did also, waltzed admirably. The ringlets of her beautiful hair, black as the raven's wing, which she wore very long, floated luxuriantly from her classical head, which was turned somewhat backward as she moved.

It must have been, that this woman was either excessively strong in her innocence, or profoundly disdainful of the world's censure, which she braved so boldly, after the cruel words of Mademoiselle de Maran, which had so recently awakened, if I may so speak, all the real or imaginary slanders which had been spread everywhere about her conduct. That which surprised me most, however, was the expression of M. de Lancry's features during that waltz, for he appeared, by turns, disdainful, irritated, and sarcastic: and when he led Madame de Richeville to her seat, I perceived that she smiled bitterly at something which he whispered to her in a low voice.

At first, I know not wherefore, I felt as it were a tightness at my heart, as I saw M. de Lancry waltz with Madame de Richeville. I remembered, involuntarily, the words which I had heard, and I entertained not a doubt but that he loved her. She had an expression of resolution, and of pride, which almost frightened me; and yet, when I thought that she was the friend of M. de Mortagne, who had protected me—who had been, as Madame Blondeau has since told me, so devoted to my mother—I tried to get over the disagreeable impression which she produced upon me. These thoughts were again cut short by the country dances for which I was engaged. My reputation, as satirical, had doubtless reached already several of my partners; for more than one of them, thinking to please my sarcastic taste, put themselves to a great expense in the epigrammatic line; while others loaded me with absurd praises; and others yet, made jokes which I could not understand.

To take it altogether, although several among them were agreeable men, few of them seemed to me to possess that perfect tact with which M. de Lancry was gifted. For, in truth, a man must have both great capacity and great delicacy of intellect to set a young girl at her ease, and to enjoy all that is charming in her conversation. His language must be one of which all the strong points are softened down and modified: and while it is, perhaps, a lack of good taste to praise her beauty, it is always graceful to compliment her talent. Her gaiety is far more lovely, when it is not excited beyond the limits of a smile; and it is in fact to alarm the exquisite and ingenuous delicacy of her observations, if he reply to them by slander or ill-nature.

Think me not vain, my friend, if I speak to you thus of the fairest period of our life—our woman life. Our instincts are then so noble and so generous, all our illusions are so radiant, that our characters themselves, that all our thoughts, partake of the elevation of our souls.

But to return to our ball. I saw that Ursula danced always with the same sad and touching grace. She did not appear to be much amused, but she did not refuse a single dance; she sighed, however, and seemed to be making a great sacrifice when she accepted each partner.

Having gone in at last to see the grand show of the supper, and to take a cup of tea, we left the ball. M. de Lancry, who was also going home, met us again in the saloon; he called for my aunt's people, and brought us our shawls.

M. de Versac gave his arm to Ursula; M. de Lancry offered his to Mademoiselle de Maran, who said to him, laughing, "I wish you would not pay me these absurd attentions, Gontran. Am I of a proper figure to accept them? Give your arm to my niece; I can take care of myself alone."

When we had all got into the carriage, my aunt called out to him again—

"Now, then, Gontran, since you have come back at last, I reckon upon seeing you very often with your uncle; you know that I never allow people to neglect me. By-the-bye, do you know that she has a brazen mask, though it be *couleur de rose*—that fair duchess of yours! and that it requires all the fires of hell itself to make her blush! But what is this that I am saying before these girls? Come, come. Good night, Gontran, and beware; look to yourself, if you do not intend to be very attentive to me.

M. de Lancry assured my aunt of his earnest desire to obey her, returned to the Hotel de Maran.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE DAY AFTER THE BALL.

THERE are certain impressions, as there are certain landscapes, which must be viewed from a distance, if you would have them in all their force.

The day after the ball, as I collected all my recollections, as I recalled to mind the most minute details, I felt, if I may so speak, the reaction.

Yet why, my friend, should I conceal it from you? Among all my memories, one only was predominant. M. de Lancry waltzing with Madame de Richeville! The waltz was one of Weber's.

The air, which was itself melancholy, came back to me incessantly, while I could not recollect that of the country dance, which I had danced with M. de Lancry. The result of all my impressions was almost melancholy. The world, notwithstanding its perfect urbanity—notwithstanding its exquisite and beautiful exterior—appeared to me to be in fact an arena, where people dealt each other the most deadly blows, with smiles on the lip, and flowers upon the brow.

This was but too clearly proved by what I had seen pass between Mademoiselle de Maran and the Duchesse de Richeville. I had listened to words only the most apparently polite, and yet I could not doubt that their sense contained some cruel mystery.

I had, however, received very great attention; and, to lay aside all false modesty, I could not but be aware that I had been considered very pretty; for I had remarked that Mesdemoiselles de B—— and de P—— had scarcely danced above three or four sets, while Ursula and myself had been frequently compelled to refuse. Moreover, I had not failed to hear that sort of murmur, as I passed to and fro the room, which is always so flattering to a woman's vanity. M. de Lancry, beyond all comparison the most brilliant person in the assembly, had been exceedingly marked in his attentions to us; and yet the impression left upon my mind, by the events of the evening, was sad and almost bitter.

Nevertheless, I had gained one pleasant thought, or rather one vague hope, from that gala night. M. de Mortagne was about to return!

I thought of his return with unmixed satisfaction, for a confused sense that I stood in need of grave and trustworthy advice began to dawn upon me. I not only felt a most sincere aversion to my aunt, but her praises, her advice, her most every-day remarks, inspired me with a sort of distrust and inquietude that can hardly be described. I was, as it were, in the situation of those wretches who fear the presence of poison in everything that comes to their lips. I loved Ursula with my whole soul; but then she was as young, as inexperienced as myself. I had the most perfect confidence in the devotion of Madame Blondeau; but the extent of that admirable woman's knowledge, and of her power also, went not beyond the length of an almost blind attachment to my person.

My guardian, M. d'Orbeval, Ursula's father, was living in Touraine, on a property which he possessed in that province, and, indeed, I now never saw him; but had I done so, like all the rest of my relations, he was entirely under my aunt's dominion. I could not, therefore, but look to the return of M. de Mortagne as to an event of the most favourable consequence, apart even from the consideration that he had promised to return whenever he could be of any real service to me.

There was another thing which seemed even to increase my anxiety to see him; the strange sort of terror, namely, which my aunt had displayed at the mention of his name by Madame de Richeville.

While my thoughts were thus occupied, Ursula entered my room. We began to talk about the ball; and I the more readily surmounted the difficulty of mentioning the slight sense of jealousy with which she had inspired me, before setting out for the hotel of the ambassadress, since, during the whole continuance of the ball, I had enjoyed the success of my cousin as if it had been my own.

"Do you know, my dear Ursula," I said to her with a smile, "that from my bright and joyous expression last night, the world might have fancied I was enjoying my own triumph; while, in reality, it was my pride on your account, that made me so happy. And yet, what does it signify to us? we know, each of us, all the secrets of the other's heart."

"What do you think of M. de Lancry?" answered my cousin, quite abruptly.

"I think him delightful," I replied, surprised not a little by this sudden question; "yes, delightful—especially when he is not dancing with that haughty Duchesse de Richeville."

Ursula looked at me fixedly, dropped her eyes to the ground, was silent for a moment, and replied,

"Do you wish me, Matilda, to tell you what I think?"

"Yes—oh yes! tell me quick!"

"Well, then, I think that Mademoiselle de Maran and M. de Versac would be very glad to marry you to M. de Lancry."

At first, I started with astonishment; and then, struck by the absurdity of the speech, I burst into laughter.

"What do you see so absurd in the idea, then, Matilda? Did not M. de Versac present M. de Lancry to Mademoiselle de Maran? Did she not instantly beg him to come and visit her very often in the morning? And now, whom else does she receive as morning visitors, I pray you? Five or six only of her most intimate friends; and to what end could she have made this exception in favour of the Duc de Versac's nephew?"

"Do you wish me, Ursula, to tell you what *I* think?" I answered, using the precise words she had used before. "It is, that M. de Versac and Mademoiselle de Maran would be very glad to marry you to M. de Lancry!"

It was now Ursula's turn to smile. "What nonsense!" she replied; "so fine a match for a poor girl like me—with neither rank nor fortune—that is out of the question. No! no! you know my wish, my resolution never to marry. I have too much sense, I assure you, to aim at what I can never even hope for; and, besides, if it were in my power to marry M. de Lancry to-morrow, believe me, I would not. Does that surprise you?" she continued; "yet so it is, in truth! He is too handsome, too elegant, too fashionable, to suit me. I was not made to fill such a position; my life must glide away in calm obscurity; and I look forward to no happiness beyond the witnessing of yours."

"We shall never agree about the part which you are to play, my sweet Ursula; but you will see. If I may give ear to the whisperings of my heart, you will be happy on your own account. But to return to M. de Lancry; why do you suppose that those *dangerous advantages*, which he possesses, should be more to my taste than they are to yours?"

"As to myself—simply, because, if he were to marry me, M. de Lancry would be, in some sort, taking a wife below his own elevation! As to you—because, inasmuch as possessing yourself the same dangerous advantages, as you call them, you could not be otherwise, I should think, than enchanted by the prospect of such a marriage."

"Ursula, you are a little goose. M. de Lancry thinks no more about me than I do about him; and, moreover, like yourself, I should prefer a less brilliant, and, for that very reason, more secure sphere of happiness."

"And yet you think M. de Lancry *delightful!*"

"Heavens! what a little witch you are! To be sure I do—as delightful as one can think a person she has seen for two hours."

"Oh, yes! and *especially delightful when he is not dancing with that haughty Duchesse de Richeville.*"

I could not help blushing, as I answered, "Yes, cousin mine, it is so; but I can no more tell you why it is so, than I can explain why I blush at hearing you repeat the words I used five minutes since myself."

"Why is it so? why is it so? and do you wish me to tell you?" answered my cousin sadly; "it is because you are going to fall in love with him!"

"Again! Ursula, again! you are absolutely childish!"

"No! no! Matilda, I am not childish; my friendship for you, my dread of being forgotten—my jealousy, if you choose so to call it, of your affections, answer the purpose of that experience which it is impossible for me to possess, and make me sharper-sighted, as to your feelings, than yourself—yourself even; and yet, Matilda—and yet, I ought to have expected this change in your life. Forgive, then—oh, forgive these silly tears!" and with these words, she threw herself into my arms, weeping convulsively.

I cannot explain to you, my friend, how deeply I was moved—how fervently I responded to this outbreak of Ursula's affections. I tried to encourage her by every warm, every affectionate assurance.

"There!" I exclaimed, wiping away a tear from my own eyes; "there not a word more; I do not want another word to make me hate M. de Lancry! I swear to you—"

"Silence! Matilda!" Ursula interrupted me, laying her hand softly on my mouth; "oh, silence! I have been very foolish—very, very wrong, indeed, to give way to my first impulse; but it was too violent to be controlled; my poor heart was full to overflowing—and it *has* overflowed! and now I can conceal from you nothing that I feel for you, or think of you!"

Here Blondeau interrupted our conversation, rushing in with a sudden exclamation:

"Good Lord! Mademoiselle, see what a lovely carriage! there has never been one like it in our court-yard, I warrant me; and what a beautiful young gentleman has just stepped out of it! He asked for Mademoiselle de Maran, and he met M. Bisson upon the threshold, who has broken something, I am quite sure, for he was walking very fast, and had forgotten to take his hat; and he looked quite scared, too, I can tell you."

Ursula looked at me, and I understood the glance in a moment. The young gentleman about whom our nurse was talking could be no other than M. de Lancry.

I was annoyed by this early visit, which, I thought, showed a want of tact; so much so, that I determined not to go down stairs, in case Mademoiselle de Maran should call for me, on any pretext. But in a moment we heard the rattling of a carriage, and Blondeau, running to the window, cried out, "Ah! now the young gentleman is going away; he has not made a very long visit."

I felt relieved from a great weight, and almost regretted that I had no opportunity of refusing to go down stairs to Mademoiselle de Maran. A little while before dinner we went to join my aunt in the drawing-room, where she was sitting all alone, and seemingly very much out of humour.

"Well!" she said, as we came in, "you cannot guess the awkwardness of that abominable M. Bisson, who is for ever breaking something or other: but, please God, he shall never set his foot within my doors again."

"Has M. Bisson broken something again, aunt?"

"Broken *something*, indeed! to be sure he has, and it is all the fault of that stupid wretch, Servien," cried my aunt, bursting again into a fresh fit of anger. "I had forbidden him, once for all, to let that odious man ever come into my drawing-room. I was alone in my boudoir, writing a letter, with the door partly open, when, all of a sudden, I heard a sharp whizzing noise, like the buzzing of a shuttle. Not guessing what it could be, I rose, and went into the drawing-room, and what do you think I saw? That wretched M. Bisson, seated in my arm-chair, with my clock in his lap, fiddling about at the inner works with my scissors; he had broken the mainspring, and that made the whizzing noise which I had heard."

Mademoiselle de Maran was in such a passion, that she did not perceive us laughing at her in our sleeves, and went on: "Upon my word! I could have beaten him, if I had been strong enough. I said to him, 'Have you then sworn to break everything in my house? Can you never keep yourself quiet, odious man that you are?' 'Why,' he answered me, 'what would you have me do while I am waiting for you? I am bored to death when I have nothing to do;' and he spoke so stupidly, and with so much sang-froid, setting the clock down upon the floor, that, upon my word and honour! I could refrain no longer. I flew at him—I pushed him—I drove him out of the house, and he ran off quite terrified."

"And without taking his hat, I see," said I to my aunt. "Look! he has left it here upon this chair."

"So much the better!" she exclaimed, "so much the better! I wish he would catch a good brain fever, that they might shut him up for a madman, which he is, in spite of all his learning."

It must have been the fact, that Mademoiselle de Maran was in a dreadful passion, for she repulsed the caresses of her venerable Felix, who returned, growling, to his corner.

The sight of Felix recalled the courage of M. de Mortagne to my mind, which I had admired so much in my childhood, when he had dared to beat that odious animal; and, thinking of this, I took courage to ask Mademoiselle de Maran whether she knew where M. de Mortagne was at that time, and when he was likely to return?

I thought my aunt would have blasted me, if she had been able, by a glance of her eye, as she exclaimed, "Is that any concern of yours? How do you presume to ask me such a question? Do you suppose I trouble myself about the movements of such a man as that? No! God be praised! whatever that fine duchess may say about it, whose heart is as black as hell itself, it is enough for you to know that *he is well off where he is*, and that he will long *remain there!* do you understand? accursed Jacobin that he is!"

I underline these words, my friend, because I absolutely shudder, in my own despite, at the malignant—nay, almost fierce expression which my aunt threw into her pronunciation of them. I involuntarily recollected, as she spoke, how, almost ten years before, she had cast a glance of implacable and utter hatred at M. de Mortagne, actually breaking, in her passion, a needle which she held in her hand, almost in the place where she was now sitting.

I could not find a word to say or to answer, so much was I afraid of Mademoiselle de Maran. But after a silence of some moments, she took up the word again—"Gontran," she said, "came hither to offer me the box of the gentlemen of the bed-chamber at the opera-house for to-morrow night. I have accepted it, and we will go."

I thought this was a grand opportunity of being very heroical, and of proving my affection for Ursula, by declining this occasion of again meeting M. de Lancry; and I answered, "I am so much tired by the ball, aunt, that I should rather decline going to the opera."

"You would rather do just that, Miss, which I desire you to do," replied Mademoiselle de Maran, very tartly.

Ursula looked at me with an imploring glance, and replied,

"Oh! if you absolutely desire it, I will go to the opera."

CHAPTER XV.

THE OPERA.

The conversation which Ursula had held with me touching the possibility of my marriage to De Lancry, set me to thinking very deeply as soon as I found myself alone.

Perhaps, indeed, if it had not been for the remarks of my cousin, I should have been a long time without calling myself to account concerning the impression which the nephew of M. de Versac had made upon me. But now, I questioned myself frankly; endeavouring to divest myself of that favourable prejudice, which is always left upon our minds by the society of a man who joins, to the attractions of highly-distinguished manners and a fine person, the prestige of an historic name.

I asked myself, if the memory of M. de Lancry affected me in anywise—if I felt any interest in him; but it occurred to me that I was in a state of absolute indifference as regarded him. I was only surprised that I should have experienced an unpleasant feeling at seeing him dance with Madame de Richeville; and, for the very reason that this feeling and the cause of it alike appeared entirely inexplicable, I still persisted, and at last succeeded, in discovering it. The remark of Ursula had put me on the right scent.

It has always been my opinion, that women have no determined character until they have learned to love. The first impressions, or, if I may so speak, the first interests of love, once brought into play—once thoroughly awakened—arouse, develop, and excite peculiar faculties of the soul, noble, as it may be, or perilous; which, by degrees, swallow up all the rest, and remain sole masters of the mind.

Thus, in my own instance, at seventeen, I had no predominating quality, whether of good or evil; it would have been difficult, I think, to distinguish or define any one trait of my character.

I was, by turns, humble and haughty to excess, in proportion as I had, during my childhood, been absurdly flattered, or depreciated to the very verge of insult. I was pious, both naturally and from conviction; I felt, as it were, an imperious necessity for thanking God for all the blessings that befel me—a quality which, praiseworthy in the first instance, I carried to an excess that was merely puerile at first, but which, at a later period, reached the verge of fanatical impiety. I was as generous as it was in my power to be; but, to my shame be it confessed, I was never so much inclined to sympathise with the wretched, as when I felt myself unhappy; then I was all eagerness to anticipate the wants of others, and to console their sorrows. Happiness, on the contrary, if it did not absolutely make me selfish, at least absorbed me altogether. It was necessary to call forth my play, in order keenly to arouse my sympathies. Whether of good or ill, my feelings were more durable than they were violent. I pardoned a wrong done me, or an affront offered, but I did not forget it. Not, indeed, that I sought to injure those who had offended me, but that I avenged myself, to my own contentment, by a continued scorn. You therefore see, my friend, that there was as yet nothing marked, nothing determinate or striking in my character.

Now, from the day when I first met M. de Lancry, a passion of which up to that time I had been completely ignorant began to grow upon me; imperceptibly at first, and almost intangible, and showing itself originally in a vague dislike to seeing a man whom I hardly knew, waltz with a woman whom I did not know at all.

Alas! my friend, I need not tell you that this passion, which was one day destined to enchain all the rest, and to become the mainspring of my character, was *jealousy!*—jealousy, at one time restrained, concealed, stifled and disowned by my pride; at another, confessed, exposed to view, humble and supplicatory even to the very verge of baseness. Accustomed, from my childhood, to reflect much, and to fall back upon my own resources—having a quick imagination, and rather lively penetration, I was not long in finding an answer to the question which my cousin had proposed—"why it should be more disagreeable to see M. de Lancry dance with the Duchesse de Richeville than with any other woman?"

Yet, I assure you, that although I thought M. de Lancry very agreeable, I yet felt nothing which seemed to me like love—like those unknown emotions which we still picture to ourselves to be so sweet, and so serene.

I thought, moreover, that it might be perhaps the better for me to struggle against that sentiment, if it should chance to arise within me—a sentiment which might render me the most wretched of our sex, for it might be that M. de Lancry would not participate in it—or, if he should, that his views might not be pleasing to his family or my own.

During all these considerations, too weighty quite for a poor head of seventeen, I regretted more than all the absence of my only friend, M. de Mortagne, in whom I felt that I could repose a sort of instinctive confidence. Unhappily for me, however, those last words of Mademoiselle de Maran banished from my mind all those sweet hopes which Madame de Richeville had awakened in my mind, by announcing the return of my protector. You will readily comprehend, my friend, that, having once given myself up to these reflections, ever resolute to keep a close watch on the slightest motions of my heart, I awaited that evening on which, for a second time, I was to see M. de Lancry, with a sort of restless anxiety.

We did not reach the opera-house till it was very late; the saloon was entirely filled, and with the most brilliant and distinguished persons; for Madame la Duchesse de Berry was present at the performance of the "Siege of Corinth." The very moment I entered our box, the first person on whom I cast my eyes was the Duchesse de Richeville, whom I saw nearly opposite with my aunt's friend, Madame de Mirecourt and her husband, who accompanied them.

It is impossible to imagine any one more elegantly dressed, or handsomer, than Madame de Richeville. Her turban of white gauze, embroidered splendidly in silver lama-work, set off her dark complexion admirably, and her long ringlets of rich raven hair. She wore a short-sleeved dress of cherry-coloured velvet, and, notwithstanding that she had long gloves on, the exquisite colour of her arms was clearly visible. She carried in her hand a large bouquet of white roses, which was one of the greatest rarities that can be obtained in the winter season.

I did all in my power to render myself indifferent to her charms, but all was in vain; I could not prevent a sense of sadness from coming over me; the melancholy air of Weber's waltz, to which I had seen her dance as De Lancry's partner, ceased not to form, as it were, an accompaniment to my sad thoughts.

Soon after our entrance, I observed Madame de Mirecourt lean down to speak to the duchess, who was very short-sighted, unquestionably with the view of directing her attention to us; and the next moment that lady raised her opera-glass quickly, and looked at me very attentively, but no longer with that air of haughty and malevolent affectation which had struck me in her manner on the previous evening.

Meanwhile the curtain rose—I am passionately fond of music; and the opera appeared to me so beautiful, and new, that I gazed and listened with the enthusiastic eagerness of a girl fresh from the school-room.

During the interval of the acts, however, I looked around the house, and saw M. de Lancry present himself in the box of the Duchesse de Berry, which that princess had not yet quitted for her saloon. It occurred to me that her Royal Highness received M. de Lancry with much distinction; for she conversed with him some time, and when he was about to withdraw, agreeable to etiquette, she condescended to detain him during some moments longer.

When he retired from the royal box, I confess that I was curious to see whether he would come to visit us, or pay his respects to the Duchesse de Richeville, in the first instance; and that, for several minutes, that curiosity amounted almost to anguish. My heart beat anxiously and quick when I heard the door of our box open, and I doubted not that it was M. de Lancry.

I was right—it was he!

Yet I now felt disturbed and agitated, nor did I dare to turn my head, when I heard him address Mademoiselle de Maran, and my cousin Ursula, until my aunt, tapping me lightly on the arm, called my attention, saying,

"Matilda, you do not see M. de Lancry?"

I turned half round, and felt that I blushed as I bowed to him; but by degrees I regained my self-possession, and joined in the conversation, as my confusion passed away. M. de Lancry was exceedingly agreeable, and full of brilliancy and wit. He knew all Paris, and all Paris had assembled to that night's performance. I perfectly well remember the least point of the conversation, for M. de Lancry appeared to me in an entirely new light, and one surpassingly to his advantage.

"Come, Gontran," said Mademoiselle de Maran, "since you go out everywhere, help me to make the acquaintance of all the *beau monde* here, whom I do not know—tell me about them all; for I am, I assure you, quite as much a stranger here, as these young girls. It is more than fifteen years since I have set my foot within the opera-house. I suppose you have all the pea-blossoms of the Bank here, have you not? rich enough to astound all decent people! That sort of thing, you know, has always its own private box at the opera, while those of our class modestly profit by admissions to the court boxes, which are the best, after all, thank God!"

"I should be very much puzzled, indeed, madam," replied De Lancry, laughing, "to be your interpreter-general; for, during the four months which I have spent in England, many of the *Bank* boxes, as you call them, have changed owners. I scarcely know a soul in them, so capricious is the Exchange, and so abruptly does she build up and demolish fortunes."

"That last blow only is now spared us, of seeing such folks as those rich in perpetuity! If it were so, it would be a pretty example for other malefactors," answered Mademoiselle de Maran. "But tell me; who is that little person, in the second circle, with the rose-coloured *berret!* She is quite pretty, is she not?"

"Extremely pretty," said M. de Lancry. "She and her husband are heroine and hero of a little romance, which, though exceedingly simple, is, I think, quite as touching." And, as he spoke, there was an accent and expression of melancholy in his voice and his features, which, while it surprised me not a little, lent a new fascination to his manner.

"Oh, heavens! Gontran, tell us about it, I beseech you. What is her name—this charming heroine of yours?"

"The name of my hero and heroine is not, I must own, the most romantic—a Monsieur and Madame Dupré; that is all!" said De Lancry, with a faint smile.

"Dupré! Indeed, I think it a very good name," said my aunt. "Why; is not it worth as much as that of the Duparcs, the Duponts, the Dumonts, or the Dubois? Come, Gontran, by all means let us have the romance of M. and Madame Dupré!"

"Picture to yourself, then, madam, that about two years ago—" but here M. de Lancry interrupted himself, and said to my aunt, "But pardon me, for indeed your ironical smile quite overpowers me. Suffer me, I beg of you, to tell my tale to Mesdemoiselles Matilda and Ursula. I am sure, that so far from laughing at me, they will find much to interest them in my simple little tale."

I raised my eyes, and meeting the gaze of M. de Lancry fixed on my face, I blushed again, though I know not wherefore; but my aunt exclaiming, 'Go on! go on! tell your story to these little girls; I will not look at you, and if I laugh at all, it shall be aside;"

He replied, addressing himself to me, "Well, then, mademoiselle, M. and Madame Dupre had made a very happy marriage—"

"Capital! capital!" interrupted Mademoiselle de Maran; "this begins just like one of the little tales of L'Ami des Enfants,* or one of Berquin's stories. I only just wish to ask you, if it is a late captain of the hussars of the body-guard who is the teller? But proceed, proceed; here is the beautiful Princess of Ksernika just coming into her box with her train. You will have finished your tale before the perfume-bearer, the fan-bearer, the opera-glass-bearer, the bouquet-bearer, and the play-bill-bearer, have all performed their duties. I fancy, she is a princess who would scarcely be an admirer of the tales of Berquin!"

"I believe, madam," said M. de Lancry with a wicked smile, "that I can perfectly appreciate the difference between a tale of Berquin's, and the Princess Ksernika; but I am now addressing myself to these young ladies, and I have no pardon to beg of them for the *naive* simplicity of this true story—so I proceed:

"M. and Madame Dupre were perfectly happy, and enjoyed a competent fortune. It matters not, whether it was owing to the bankruptcy of a creditor, or the breach of trust of a friend, but on a sudden they were ruined utterly. M. Dupre had an old blind mother, whom he loved almost to idolatry, who had given up to him all that she possessed, on condition of living with him and his wife, whom she loved as her own daughter. It was for her, therefore—for her indeed only, that the Dupres first felt the grievous bitterness of the poverty which had befallen them. She had enjoyed all the advantages of wealth so long that they had become almost indispensable to her, and they resolved that she should never know the disaster which had so reduced them. This project her infirmity assisted them amazingly in executing. The trifling relics of their fortune enabled them, for a little while, to meet their expenses; and, in the mean time, M. Dupre, who thoroughly understood German and English, made translations for the booksellers; and his little wife, who drew admirably, employed herself in designing for albums, and even in painting fans. By dint of industry, of privation—and above all, by presence of mind and tact, they continued for two whole years to keep up the deception to their mother, so that, perceiving no alteration in her comforts, she never so much as suspected the misfortune which had overwhelmed her children; a misfortune which they would have felt twice as bitterly, had she discovered it, both on account of the grief she would have experienced, and the privations she would have insisted on enduring. At last—it is but a few days since—M. Dupre received an enclosure of a hundred thousand francs in a letter, which, some say, informed him that it was a restitution on the part of the bankrupt who had ruined him; while others attribute it to the generosity of an anonymous benefactor."

"Which appears a much more probable solution," said my aunt, "than the repentance of a swindler."

"Of this, however, there is no doubt, Mademoiselle, that, thanks to this sum, these good and brave-hearted young people, now almost accustomed to their labours, have well-nigh recovered their former independence; and that their aged mother has never perceived the abyss of misery, the very verge of which she has been coasting."

"This finishes just as it should—just as it began!" said Mademoiselle de Maran, "and proves that good conduct is sure to find its reward. And this is why that beautiful Princess Ksernika, when she goes into the presence of the Lord, will not remain there very long!"

"You laugh at me, madam," replied M. de Lancry; "nevertheless, I shall have courage to maintain that this little anecdote is one of those which are the most honourable to our times. Do you not discover," he continued, turning to me, "a rare degree of delicacy in conduct such as this? The very fact of having so absolute a self-possession, as not only to repress every lamentation, but to keep down the least allusion to miseries which might overwhelm, while they are concealed from a sense of affectionate solicitude for another's feelings—the very power of maintaining presence of mind so perfect, strength of soul so remarkable, as in the midst of suffering and sorrow to preserve that gay and even manner which is the result of care and independence; do not these form a beautiful and touching picture? Two persons, themselves so delicate and young, religiously deceiving that old parent, and by stern dint of labour creating for her, as it were, a little nook of wealth and comfort in the midst of their own cold and barren misery!"

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* A popular and almost universally-known school-book.

"Ah! surely that is beautiful—that is most touching," replied Ursula, in tones of great emotion, raising her hand to her eyes. "When we hear of such actions, we no longer regret being poor, since poverty can give birth to deeds and developments of character so noble."

I was so deeply moved myself, that I could find no words to express myself, and rejoiced that Ursula had contrived to speak. Monsieur de Lancry had related this little tale—which was indeed simple, but which, from that very quality, possessed an uncommon charm when in the mouth of such a man—with perfect grace of language and of manner. I had looked at him several times during the narration; and while I perceived that I could discover a fresh attraction in the touching expression of his features, I could not but believe that one capable of appreciating so generously a fine action, must be as capable of imitating as of admiring it. Nor was I less astonished than delighted; for I had not expected to find so rare a sensibility under the dazzling exterior of a man of the world; so that my heart throbbed painfully when I heard my aunt say to Monsieur de Lancry,

"My niece Matilda is so satirical, that, for all her sister-Angelica air, she is quite capable of turning your story into ridicule, my poor Gontran, whatever the rest may think of it."

I raised my eyes quickly to Monsieur de Lancry, as if to contradict her; but when I met his glance, it was so sorrowful, and wore so disappointed an expression, that I could well-nigh have wept, from chagrin and vexation. I hardly know how this scene would have ended, had it not been for the arrival of Monsieur de Versac, which preceded a few moments the last rising of the curtain. I experienced a strange agitation, a kind of dizziness, which the power of the music appeared to augment; every thought which disturbed me being accompanied, as it were, by a harmony, tender by turns, and by turns passionate and pensive, which was but too much in unison with the state of my heart.

Music in certain circumstances has strange power over us. It seems to translate to our own apprehension our own thoughts, how secret soever they may be—how confused, nay, sometimes, how guilty—and that, too, in a language so intoxicating and delicious, that we abandon ourselves to its perilous fascination.

So was it now with me. So, without dreaming, for a moment, of the obstacles which might arise against the sentiment now waking so deliciously within me—cradled, as I may say, by those seductive melodies, I delighted myself by dwelling on every touching word that had fallen from the lips of De Lancry. I suffered myself to be carried away by the admiration of the imaginary character with which my fancy had invested him; yet, even then, vague thoughts of jealousy came to assail me; and through that dream of almost magical excitement, the beautiful dark features of the Duchesse de Richeville seemed to float dizzily before me.

When the last act was ended, I still listened; I still was absorbed so completely, that my aunt had to call me several times before she could arouse me from my reverie.

Everybody was already leaving the saloon, when I took the arm of M. de Versac; Ursula leant on M. de Lancry. I was almost mechanically going down the staircase, scarce hearing or seeing anything that was going on around me, when, just as our carriage was announced, I was sensible of a very pleasant but very powerful perfume, and at the same moment the rustling of some soft tissue against my dress; while a sweet voice, in tones of affectionate emotion, whispered almost in my ear,

"Beware! poor child, beware! they are about to marry you. Wait for M. de Mortagne."

I turned my head round quickly, to discover, if possible, who it was that had spoken to me; but I saw only the cherry-coloured train and the silver-lama turban of the Duchesse de Richeville, who, with M. and Madame Mirecourt, was passing lightly down the staircase just in front of me.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE CONFESSION.

A MONTH had elapsed from the night on which I went with my aunt and M. de Lancry to the opera. He had come regularly—at first every two or three days, but afterward daily, to call on Mademoiselle de Maran; and, as our intimacy became greater, I discovered in him a thousand qualities of new attraction. It is not possible that any character could be found more even, more unselfish, more delicate in its attentions. His intellect, quick, fanciful and lively, gifted him with so much tact in disguising his soft praises, that he continued to render them acceptable even to me; ever distrustful as I was of anything that could bear the semblance of flattery, remembering always my aunt's treacherous exaggerations of the advantages which, she would have it, I possessed.

Ardent and generous ever, there was no noble cause which M. de Lancry defended not; full of ingenuous modesty, he was annoyed visibly when one so much as hinted at the merit by which he had attained distinction so uncommon at his years; and as for his success in the world, although that was a subject, of course, but rarely touched on in my presence and that of Ursula, it was yet easy to perceive that he was in nowise intoxicated by it. His conversation, when in the vein, was, if not actually serious, at least instructive; he had travelled much, and travelled, too, with profit. He spoke with rare taste of the fine arts, and had an intimate acquaintance with all the literature of the day.

When I describe his merits to you at such length, I almost confess that I loved him. Yes, I did love him! How, indeed, could I help loving him? Living, as I did with my aunt, almost in solitude—seeing no one but him, and him daily, how could I long resist the charms of manner which rendered him so fascinating? I have already told you, how dull and monotonous was the life which I led at Mademoiselle de Maran's. As soon, however, as M. de Lancry was associated intimately in our circle, everything was changed; the hope, the delight of seeing him—the desire of pleasing him—the dread of not succeeding—the memories that thronged upon me in his absence—the long reveries—in a word, the ten thousand indescribable anxieties of that mysterious passion, involved me in continual perturbation, and the time passed away with the speed of the whirlwind.

I loved him; and I was, by turns, all happiness, or all despair, in that engrossing passion. All happiness—when in my rare fits of self-confidence, when in the pride of youth, in the pride of beauty, in the pride of my own heart, I asked myself if Gontran could look in another for all those pledges, all those proofs of happiness, which I believed myself enabled to bestow upon him, if he should ask my hand? Again, I was all despair—when in doubt of myself; distrusting my own beauty; almost distrusting my own heart. I dared not believe that Gontran loved me; nay, persuaded myself even, that he was attached to Madame de Richeville.

Then would the words, which she had spoken to me at the opera in tones of affection, "Beware! poor child, beware!" recur with strange emphasis to my spirit. Discouraged as I was, and downcast, I could not bring myself to hate that woman, interpreting those words of hers as if she had said to me—"Beware! poor child. It is intended to make up a match between you and Gontran; you, who have no charms capable of rivetting his affections; you, who will suffer only the effects of an unrequited passion."

When, on the other hand, my self-confidence regained its tone, I perceived only in those words of the duchess a sort of covert menace—a sort of prohibition, to pretend to a heart which she possessed as her own empire. I was, moreover, overwhelmed more completely by these vague and warring fancies, because I had no one to whom I could confide them. My guardian, M. d'Orbeval, had recalled Ursula to his presence some time previously, and our separation, although its duration had been as yet but short, was not on that account the less grievous. Especially, at this time, the absence of my cousin seemed to me doubly painful.

At times, in the midst of my perturbed doubts, I consoled myself by the idea, that Mademoiselle de Maran would have never received M. de Lancry with so marked, so open a display of satisfaction, if this termination had not met her views; and yet neither my aunt nor M. de Versac had made the least allusion to the possibility of a marriage between myself and De Lancry.

At last, these doubts and troubles were brought to a conclusion.

It was the 15th of February, for I remember the day, the date, and all the circumstances that transpired, as if they had been things of yesterday. It was the 15th of February; I was alone in my aunt's drawing-room, where I expected to find her, but she had left the room, giving orders that if any one should call, he should be told that she was about to return directly.

I was reading the Meditations of Lamartine, when I heard the door of the apartment open suddenly, and Servien announced M. le Vicomte de Lancry.

Never before had I been left alone with Gontran, and now I felt myself in a state of terrible embarrassment.

"They told me, mademoiselle, that your auut was about to return hither in a few minutes, and that she wished any person who might call, to wait for her;" and then"—he hesitated for a few moments, and when he spoke again, it was with an air of some confusion—"and then I did not expect the happiness of finding you here; permit me, therefore, to profit by an opportunity so rare and so precious, and let me beseech you to hear me."

"Sir," I replied, almost stammering with agitation, and my heart beating to such a degree as to be actually painful, "I beg your pardon; I do not, I believe, quite understand; what can you have to say to me?"

Then, in a low and trembling voice, the fascinating harmony of which, never—no, never, will be effaced from my memory, he said, "Suffer me, then, mademoiselle, to speak to you at length, and with the most entire frankness, and be kind enough, I entreat you, to promise even to give me an answer."

"I will—I will promise you," I replied, much confused, but yet more anxious.

"Then, mademoiselle," he continued, "I must tell you that my uncle, the Duc de Versac, profiting by a secret which he has succeeded in discovering—although, I pledge my word to you, I never had revealed it to him—had determined to ask your hand, in my behalf, of madam your aunt; but I implored him not to do so."

My heart failed me; I felt it shudder and stand still within me! I believe that M. de Lancry was prejudiced to my disadvantage, and it was with weak and faltering accent that I answered,

"It is unnecessary to give me this information—I assure you, sir!"—— I began, but words were wanting to me, and I broke off abruptly.

"No, mademoiselle, it is not unnecessary, permit me to tell you; for I could not suffer M. de Versac to make this request on my part from Mademoiselle de Maran, without having myself gained your consent."

"And it is my consent that you have come to ask?" I cried, without the power to conceal my joy, without the desire even of concealing it.

At the slight gesture of surprise which escaped Monsieur de Lancry, I almost regretted my precipitation, fearing lest he should interpret it to my disadvantage. I blushed, was confused, and was unable to add a single word.

After a moment's silence, Gontran replied—"Yes, mademoiselle, it is your consent that I have come to ask, and that not without a hope of obtaining it. You shall, at least, however, be free in your choice; for, believe me, I never should have ceased to regret it, had you been exposed to any olicitations that could have annoyed you."

"I—I—sir—"

But Gontran again interrupted me, saying, in accents which, though tender, were serious, almost even solemn, "One word, mademoiselle, one word, before I hear you overwhelm, perhaps, by an irrevocable sentence—not daring and presumptuous expectations, but hopes which, formed in secret, in secret I have scarcely dared to cherish! Permit me to lay open to you the whole spirit of my thought. You are an orphan; you are almost alone in the world; it is my duty, as an upright man of honour, to address you with the same seriousness of language, with which I would approach your mother. You can judge why, under these circumstances, I address myself to you, and not to Mademoiselle de Maran," added Gontran, with a manner so significant, as to prove that he knew the relations which existed between my aunt and myself; although, from motives of delicacy, he was unwilling to allude to them.

I was moved deeply by the manner in which Gontran expressed himself; so grave was it, and at the same time so affectionate.

[illegible]

"I understand you," I replied, "and I thank you."

"When you shall have heard me out, mademoiselle," he replied, "you will be able to foresee the result of things with as much certainty as if they had already been accomplished. I have, perhaps, but few good qualities; but I have always been both loyal and sincere in the fulfilment of my slightest promise. I have always resolved, that I would never marry a woman whom I could not love with a devotion the most fervent, the most heartfelt, and at the same time the most respectful—with a love so affectionate and holy, that it bears no more comparison to the brief and ephemeral fancies of our youth, than do the slight and evanescent *liaisons* to which these last give birth, to the duration of the sweet and sainted state of marriage. In truth, of all that the world possesses, most high and holy, nothing is, in my eyes, so lovely or romantic as the eternal union of well-assorted spirits; that union, which I have ever dreamed of, as the sweet goal of future wishes; and to make good these wishes, it is needful only to learn to economise the treasures of that bliss, which is as enduring as our own existence. This once accomplished, it is an easy thing to pass a life—which shall be but one scene of prolonged enchantment—in mutual confidence, in tenderness and love, which the genius of the heart, if I so may speak, will soon learn to diversify with new delights. For, once again, there is nothing on earth which embraces more romance than marriage, when they who enjoy it know, indeed, how to love."

I know not how it was, that at this moment, the idea of Madame de Richeville occurred to my mind, and I could not refrain from replying to De Lancry—

"And yet, monsieur, these evanescent *liaisons* appear to me sometimes——"

"Ah! mademoiselle," he exclaimed, interrupting me, "who can compare these for an instant to the possession of legitimate and perfect bliss? Believe me, when we once love for life, we speedily discover the nothingness, the utter falsehood of those ephemeral and guilty ties. What charm can they possess, which can compare to the bliss of an affection, sanctioned before man, and blessed by God himself? Shall we the less appreciate the delight of a long evening, passed with a fair and loving woman, because that woman is our own, in the eyes both of earth and Heaven? Shall we the less enjoy her preference, because we have deserved it daily before the face of the world, by tenderness and kind attention? Shall her intelligence, her grace, and her success be the less dear to us, because her eye may dwell upon ours fearlessly, seeming to say to us, 'Enjoy the results which spring from your own inspiration?' If, in the midst of some crowded party, she receives, with a soft and mysterious smile, speaking to us alone, some sign from us of mute intelligence; shall that smile be less sweet to us, because it announces an understanding free from guilt? Because the flowers with which she is decorated have been chosen by a beloved and respected hand, shall they have less of splendour or perfume? If we would travel in far lands, and escape from the din of Paris to the calm contemplation of the charms of nature, is it quite indispensable that we should steal a daughter from her father, a young wife from her husband, in order to taste the enchantments of a love journey through regions of poetical delight? Are the bright skies of Italy or Spain veiled from the eyes of all who can look up to them without a blush of guilty consciousness? Believe me, oh! believe me, there are wells inexhaustible of pure bliss, of romantic pleasure, upspringing from a union based on love, such as I dream of: for I confess to you, it seems to me a thing impossible, to look upon marriage as a cold connexion between two isolated beings, as a life of indifference, or, at the best, of cold conventional politeness! Oh, no! no!—I would concentrate in that life, all the joys, all the adorations, all the deep powers of my soul. Now, mark my words, now that I perceive and understand the fallaciousness of youthful pleasures, they seem to me farther from happiness, than superstition is from pure religion. I know not, mademoiselle, if you have been enabled to understand me; I know not, if I have succeeded in conveying to you even a weak idea of my thoughts and my feelings. If I have been so happy as to do so—if, almost contrary to all my hopes, you can permit me to authorise M. de Versac in requesting, as he desires to do, your hand of Mademoiselle de Maran, believe me, on the faith of an honourable man! believe me, that, beloved by you, I will in all things be deserving of your love."

As he gave utterance to these last words, M. de Lancry, who had been sitting in an arm-chair, arose with an air of grave solemnity, that was extremely touching, seeming, as to me it did, to indicate the delight of his anxiety.

I cannot explain to you, my friend, all the emotions which this language —to me, at least, so novel and so unexpected—awakened in my heart. It seemed as if a new and more radiant horizon was opening upon my view. I was seized, as it were, by a sort of delicious rapture; inasmuch as the words of Gontran, on the romantic character of a legitimate affection, appeared to spring from, and carry out, a thousand thoughts, which, up to this time, had lain vague and dormant in my bosom.

The charming picture which he had set before me, of married love, with all the delicacies, the mysteries, and the excitements of prevailing passion, transported me into a state of hopefulness, ineffable—yet, oh! how heavenly!

I was too deeply happy to hide my joy—nay, to dissemble, in the least, in my reply to his confession. I felt that my cheeks were glowing, and my heart throbbing; not now with timidity, but rather with a generous and noble resolution. I thought that I would rise to the same elevation with the man who had spoken to me with such complete sincerity; whose words had inspired me with confidence, so full and invincible.

"I will be neither less frank, nor less loyal, than you have been with me," I answered him. "I am an orphan, and have no account to render, of the choice which I shall make, save to myself, and to my God. I have a deep faith in the truth of the existence of that love, which you have painted so sweetly and so touchingly, because I have myself oftentimes dreamed of the same future."

"It is true, mademoiselle; it is true! And I may then presume to hope?"

"I have promised to be frank with you—I will be so. Before I give you, not a hope, but a certainty, suffer me, too, to say a few words on *my* sentiments. Do not imagine that what I am about to say, is the expression of a doubt; which is far, far from my thought! I love my cousin as the most affectionate of sisters. She is entirely portionless, and yet desires to marry according to the dictates of her own heart. To place her in a position where she may choose, as I do, without one touch of interest to bias her decision, I wish to insure to her the half of all that I possess; and should she never marry, I wish to have her always with me. Can you consent that she shall be your sister, likewise?"

"Noble heart! noble heart! Who would not approve a soul so disinterested? Approve, said I? nay, who would not admire so pure and generous an affection? Is it not rather as a pledge of the elevation of all your other sentiments, if any one should dare to doubt them? Besides, do not I also know Mademoiselle Ursula? Am I not also well aware that she is worthy your devoted love?"

"Truly!" I cried aloud, carried away by the excess of my feelings—"truly, my heart seems to find an echo in the voice of yours. But now one —one last question," I added, dropping my eyes, and paling as I spoke: "Madame the Duchess de Richeville——" But I stopped short at the first words, unable to express myself any further.

Gontran replied at once: "I understand you, mademoiselle. The scandals of the world have reached even you. Since my return from England—or rather, since the ball at the Austrian ambassador's—I swear to you, upon my honour, that I have been occupied by but a single thought: may I say it?—by but a single person!"

I gave my hand to Gontran; but I could not prevent a tear from gliding down each cheek. Oh! what sweet tears!

"If you would have the orphan's hand, it is yours: I give it to you before God!" I answered.

"Before God, also, I make the oath to deserve it!" replied Gontran, and, falling on his knees, with a demeanour so natural, so charming—I might almost say, so pious, that there appeared no touch of exaggeration in the movement—he raised my hand to his lips. In all my life, I never have experienced an impression at once so sweet, so serene, and so triumphant. I clasped my hands forcibly together, and cried in a voice of profound emotion, "My God! my God! how can I ever be sufficiently grateful, that thou hast made my life so joyous and so lovely!"

The rolling sound of a carriage in the court-yard announced that Mademoiselle de Maran had returned.

"Matilda," said Gontran, "you will permit me to make, here at once, and before your face, my request to your aunt; then I may come and pass the evening with you."

"Oh! yes, yes!" I exclaimed joyously, "you are right. And will you come back to me this very evening?"

Mademoiselle de Maran entered the drawing-room at this moment, saying, "Well, well; I warrant me that you will never guess what Ursula has been about in Touraine."

"No, indeed, madam."

"Nor you, Gontran?"

"I cannot possibly imagine.'

"Well, then, I know it; I have just come from M. d'Orbeval's lawyer (who is mine likewise), and there he was engrossing—what do you think? I will give you a hundred—I will give you a thousand guesses."

"But, aunt—"

"He was engrossing titles—engrossing deeds of gift for Ursula! for Ursula, who is about to be married!" cried Mademoiselle de Maran, bursting into a violent fit of laughter.

"Ursula going to be married? and without writing to me?" I exclaimed in sorrowful surprise. "In her last letter, she never said a word about it."

"Wait—wait a moment. After he had opened the carriage-door, Peter just gave me half-a-dozen letters, which I put into my bag without looking at them: perhaps there is one from Ursula for you."

Mademoiselle de Maran began to rummage in her bag as she spoke, and drawing out several letters, read their directions.

"To be sure," she said, "here is one, post-marked 'Tours,' for you."

"Madam," said M. de Lancry at this moment to my aunt, "I am about to have the honour of speaking to you on a very grave and important matter. Perhaps I shall commit some offence against etiquette in entering upon such a subject without more prelude. But I am so happy, so eager to enjoy, at the soonest, the privilege which will perhaps be granted to me, that, with the consent of Mademoiselle Matilda, I venture to ask you for her hand."

"Heavens!" exclaimed my aunt; "what do you tell me, Gontran? It comes upon me like a clap of thunder! I can scarce recover from my surprise! Such a thing as this was never heard of: a marriage settled in this offhand manner!"

"You are quite right, madam: if you will only grant us your consent, I can say, from my very heart, that I believe there will never have been a marriage such as this, of all the marriages from the beginning," said Gontran, with a sly glance at me.

"But the truth is, that I am quite astonished. Such things are never managed so, my poor Gontran. The heads of the two families are the persons who should make the first overture, with all sorts of preliminary steps and formalities. Eight days are spent at least in these; then come yet more preambles; and then at length they call in the little girl—tell her it is natural to suppose that, some day or other, she must be married; and this being the case, that a young man, uniting in his own person such and such advantages, would be a very proper person for her husband."

"Well, then, dear aunt," I replied gaily, "just fancy that the eight days, with all the long preliminaries, have passed, and that you have told the little girl that a very proper person has presented himself—"

"What then?" my aunt interrupted me.

"Well, *then*," said I, taking Mademoiselle de Maran affectionately by the hand, for the first time in my life—"the little girl accepts him with the deepest gratitude."

I found her hand as cold as ice; and while she held mine fast for a long time, pressing it with her long, emaciated fingers, piercing me through and through with her cold, passionless eye, and at length smiling on me, as she alone could smile, I could not hinder a vague sentiment of terror from creeping over me; although it was speedily forgotten in what followed.

"You are determined, then," she said, "to have that abominable rake for your husband, my child? Well, if it be so, let it be! I will not be the one to stand in your way. I consent, provided that M. d'Orbeval, your guardian, and your uncle, Gontran, give their consent."

"It was his intention, madam, to have made this request of you himself, had I not forestalled him," exclaimed De Lancry in a transport of joy.

"Ah! dearest aunt, you are a second mother to me!" I cried out, very joyfully embracing her, as I did so, almost with the affection of a daughter.

"He! he! he!—do you hear this little fool?" replied my aunt, bursting into a fit of harsh and mocking laughter peculiar to herself; "me! me a second mother!"

Alas! I had indeed blasphemed that holiest name of mother, when I applied it to Mademoiselle de Maran, and Heaven was just in punishing me severely.

At nine o'clock on the same evening, Gontran returned with his uncle, M. de Versac, who announced, with a sort of official gravity, to my aunt, that the king had been graciously pleased to permit him to make over the reversion of his ducal title and his peerage to De Lancry, on the occasion of his marriage.

"So that, some day or other, you will be a duchess—certainly not so very disagreeable when it is combined with a yearly income of a hundred thousand livres," said Mademoiselle de Maran; and then she added, "But, as we speak of incomes, I have desired the servants to say that I am not at home this evening. Monsieur de Versac and I have got to talk about contracts and such stuff: lovers have nothing to do with such matters; so leave us quietly here, and go away into my library."

What shall I say to you, my friend? what can I tell you about that evening, which fleeted by so deliciously, filled with fond anticipations and sweet converse, touching the prospects of a future which showed so brilliantly in its perspective? Was it within the verge of possibility to combine more numerous or more certain chances of a happy life? Talents, good looks, attractive manners, delicacy, desert in service, birth, fortune—did not he to whom I was engaged possess all these advantages?

CHAPTER XVII.

THE LETTER.

WHAT was my surprise, when I retired to my own room! I found, in the little closet wherein I was wont to read, an immense basket filled with jasmine and heliotrope, my favourite flowers! It was in the month of February; and it was since the morning only that Gontran had the right, if I may so express myself, of offering me flowers. I could not conceive how, in so short a time, he had been able to collect such a quantity of flowers, even more rare than they were costly, at that season.

I was deeply touched by this little act of attentive foresight. Blondeau was waiting, and I imparted to her all my happiness, and all my hopes; but after she had listened attentively to what I said, that excellent woman answered,

"Unquestionably, mademoiselle, I think that M. le Vicomte de Lancry is quite as charming a person as you say. Well—one day he will be a duke—a peer of the realm—that too is very possible; but permit me to observe to you, that before marrying, it is always prudent to make inquiries."

What can you mean? inquiries?—do you not suppose that his uncle, M. le Duc de Versac, has answered all the inquiries that my aunt could think of—"

Blondeau shook her head.

"The answers of relations, my dear young lady, to such inquiries, are not the most satisfactory. It is not on what we learn from them that we can depend—nor even on what we hear from the world."

"What is the point at which you mean to arrive?"

"Listen, mademoiselle: if you will give me leave, I can find means of finding out a great many things by setting the Vicomte's people talking, below stairs."

"Ah! that is base—base! and is it to me that you presume to name so infamous a system of espial? Remember one thing!" I exclaimed indignantly—"that if you set the slightest value on my regard for you, you will promise me this instant, that you will never put the most trifling question to any of M. de Lancry's people!"

"But, mademoiselle, it is your aunt, in point of fact, who, after all, has brought about this marriage. Do you forget, then, all her spiteful actions—all the embittered hate she bore to the marchioness your mother—how she caused her to die of a broken heart? At a moment like this, when you are putting on ties that must last for ever, reflect, I entreat you, dear young lady—pardon me, that I speak to you thus! I know that I am but a poor woman, yet I love you as if you were my own child—it is this feeling, and this only, which gives me these ideas superior to my situation, gives me the courage to utter them. Poor, poor young lady—you are so good, so generous, so unsuspicious in your nature, that you feel no distrust nor doubt of any one. And as for Mademoiselle Ursula, in spite of all her sighs, and all her affectation of being a victim ever, I cannot think her frank or sincere!"

"Listen to me, Blondeau—I know that a kind of jealousy, springing from your affection, leads you to speak unjustly of Mademoiselle d'Orbeval—on that account I pardon it—but, I beg you, suffer no allusion to escape you, to this engagement which I am entering upon, and which is as honourable as it is agreeable to me. I know what I am about—I am no child. It was not Mademoiselle de Maran who proposed this match to me, but I who spoke of it to her; besides, I feel it *here*—that if my mother had been yet alive, she would have approved of this my heart's selection."

"One last remark: if, as you entertain no doubt that they will be, all the details of the Vicomte's character will prove worthy to be known and praised, why hesitate—"

"Listen, Blondeau!" I answered, in a very firm tone. "I cannot prevent you from acting according to your own opinion; but though it would truly cost me—yes, cost me very dear, to deprive myself of your services, I declare to you, that if you say one word to me on that subject, your fate is decided—I will remove you from my person, and for ever!"

"Ah! look not at me thus, mademoiselle! Good God! you look at me as you did when, yet a little girl, and set against me by your aunt's bad suggestions, you told me that I loved money better than anything in the world!"

And as she spoke the poor woman burst into tears.

But I replied to her with vexation and impatience, for her words had disturbed my most sweet illusions. I replied almost harshly, "Alas! I was so happy—so happy—and why need you, with your absurd and hateful prophecies, break in upon me, and distract my happiness?"

And then, not choosing to give up to any other hands than mine the care of arranging the precious flowers which Gontran had sent me, I took them up, and carried them into my chamber. From that day forth, I have accustomed myself to have flowers ever near me, without being aware of their presence, except by a species of drowsy consciousness of their perfume, itself by no means unpleasurable.

By degrees, the impatience which Blondeau's words had caused me passed away before the influence of my sweet memories of the bygone day. And, indeed, so thoroughly had my mind been preoccupied, that I had not even opened Ursula's letter, telling me of her marriage.

With some other papers that I thought worth keeping, I have preserved that letter. Here it is:

You will observe, in reading it, that the style is a little ambitious and romantic. I had often complained to her of this fault in her letters, but had failed in inducing her to correct it. You, my friend, who are thoroughly aware of all the phases of my friendship with Ursula, and all the consequences of her marriage, will, like myself, be scarcely able to restrain a half-bitter smile as you read these lamentable, tearful lines, in which she depicts herself, so mournfully, led out a victim to the sacrifice. But times had not then changed, all my illusions were yet fresh about me, and I was cut to the heart by the misfortunes of my Ursula. That you may see the whole at a glance, this letter, written in the most delicate, correct, and even hand, was sealed with an engraved gem, bearing a death's head, on the black wax—a seal which affected Ursula greatly. It ran thus:

"*Saint Norbet, February* 1840.

"It is done, dearest Matilda. Your wretched Ursula is sacrificed. She has now but one prospect—to devote her whole life to tears and mourning. It is with difficulty and doubt that through the gloomy clouds which veil the horizon of her future lot, she catches glimpses of the light of consolation, which she will doubtless owe to your affection. But, heavens! why should I marvel at this new blow which has befallen me—me, for so long a time, used to suffering and silence! me, the submissive victim, who have but to bow my head in tears and woe!

"Pardon, my friend—my more than friend, my sister—pardon that I intrude, blighting thy happiness by the complaints which breathe from my torn soul! For I have a prophetic sense that thou art—that thou wilt be happy—happy in thy heart's choice—in marrying him thou lovest. So beautiful, so rich, so charming, that thou hast but to appear to conquer.

"Reverse the picture! behold the hapless Ursula, portionless, void of beauty, destitute of charms, devoted from her very birth to sorrow. What would you have? it is her destiny! And yet what say I?—no! no!—I am unjust—for have I not met thee upon my pilgrimage? Hast thou not stretched a hand to the deserted outcast? Does she not owe to thy generosity, to thy touching friendship, the most precious of all gifts, as Mademoiselle de Maran terms it—a brilliant education?

"Have I not owed—do I not owe to thee, the sweetest, the most cherished sentiment of this sad heart? Alas! if it were not for that—if it were not for the involuntary hope it lends me, I should have perished of despair. Thou wouldst have had now but to lament thy friend.

"Listen, Matilda. It is a folly, thou wilt say—be it so! but it is a doleful and heart-rending folly, I assure thee. I have presentiments too fatal. But yet, whatever comes of it, I would leave thee a small memorial. I would give thee my books, and that little ornament of coral which thou knowest.

"Alas! I am poor, I have nothing—pardon the trivial present; at least, it may recall to thee our schooldays of light toil, our innocent and girlish coquetries. Is it not so, Matilda? Wilt thou not mourn thy friend? Will not a fleeting memory of her sometimes pass through thy mind, in those proud courtly fetes, of which thou wilt be queen?

"I would that I could find my last home here. I have gone often to the humble churchyard of the village, for it has nothing shocking or repulsive in its aspect—it is soft green hillock, surrounded by a hedge of elder, and of hawthorn, which in the spring-time must be all one mass of flowers—here and there stand crosses of rustic wood. How sweet it were to me, to rest here, mingled with the ashes of these poor villagers, who sleep in unknown graves!—like them, I should have passed all unappreciated, and almost unseen, through the cold world.

"Pardon me, my Matilda, for this sad opening of my melancholy letter. But my soul is so deeply pierced by sorrow, that I cannot but leave upon my paper some traces of the bitterness which fills my spirit.

"But I must tell you what is the cause of these bitter tears—

"I am about to marry!

"And, oh God! oh God! What a marriage! Farewell my girlish dreams! Farewell my fleeting hopes! And farewell, above all, that life of fond devotion, whose every instant I would have passed with thee!

"One moment—one brief moment, I thought of struggling against the dreadful and immovable will of my father; but I perceived, at once, that my life would be soon wasted in the unequal strife—that I should be broken in the struggle; and then—then a more powerful reason rose to my mind, proving that resignation was a duty. Thou shalt know wherefore.

"Eight days have passed. It was upon the very day when I last wrote to thee, that, without knowing wherefore, I was called to the apartment of my father. Him thou hast never seen except in large companies, or before Mademoiselle de Maran, who has great influence with him—to thee he must have appeared merely grave and precise, and perhaps constrained. Here he is used to govern, to speak his will inflexibly, to be obeyed; here all his features have a different expression—they are stern, almost threatening.

"'You have no fortune,' he said to me abruptly; 'you must now think of marrying. I have found a match for you, such as you could not even hope for—a young man with an income of sixty thousand livres, not taking his expectations into view, nor what he may hope to realise hereafter, for he manages his fortune admirably, and understands business very thoroughly. He will be here to-morrow with his mother. Take care that you bear yourself so as to be agreeable to him; for if you please him, the marriage is definitively settled. Above all things, be gay and simple; for M. Secherin is a good-hearted youth, perfectly frank and simple-minded. Consider all that I have said to you. I leave you now, for I must go to my farm of Santaies. In truth, that unfortunate property costs me more than it brings me in, and it is absolutely necessary that you should make a good match, or you will find yourself in a position a good deal below mediocrity!'

"Without giving me time to reply, my father left me alone.

"Oh! my beloved friend, I know not how to describe to thee the abyss of misery into which I felt myself plunged by those words,—I who, thou knowest, had always dreamed with thee of that enchanting union of kindred souls which one day, sooner or later, must come together, because, although involuntarily, they are for ever seeking each its fellow.

"I passed the night in tears. Perchance thou wilt ask me, generous and beloved sister, wherefore I had forgot thy noble promise of dividing with me thy fortune, so as to enable me to marry according to my own choice; or, should I not find one whom I could love, of keeping me to live thy friend and companion? No! Matilda, no! I had not forgot thy promise. I knew that thy heart lacked not the greatness—lacked not the true nobility to keep it. This was the cause, the only cause, why I would put it quite beyond thy powers to make so great a sacrifice to our friendship.

"In thy devotion, admirable as it was unreflecting, thou hadst no thought for the future. Thy fortune, although great, is not so much as to endure division. With the whole of it, thou art a rich heiress—thou mayst promise thyself a brilliant marriage; dividing it, thou dividest thy chance of happiness likewise.

"Doubtless, to remain with thee for ever was one of the sweetest dreams of my girlhood. But who can say, whether such an arrangement would have been agreeable to thy husband? Good God! I would rather die an hundred deaths, than be the cause of the least misunderstanding between you two! I submitted myself then, Matilda. I found in friendship strength enough to support me through that act of self-resignation. Devoting myself then to you, I shall bless ever the sacrifice I made—believing that I so insure your happiness to come.

"Alas! it has cost me very dear—bitterly did I weep during the whole night which preceded my interview with M. Secherin.

"May I dare to tell, to confess the whole even to thee? A thought of crime interrupted my tears for a little space. My father's house is surrounded by a deep moat full of water; I arose, opened my window, measured the height with my eyes: the moon was veiled by clouds, it was a gloomy winter night—the wind howled dolefully; already had I leaned far over the balcony; I said to myself—better even a death of guilt, than such a life as awaits me. A dizziness came over me; I was upon the point of yielding to that desperate impulse when, as I gave one last thought to *all* that was dear to me—that is to say, to *thee*—that one thought checked me. I yielded; I am resigned, content to live.

"Alas! and will not this life, which barely even now suffices to resist the sufferings that overwhelm me—will it not be consumed quickly by these devouring cares? Oh! if it could be so—if it could but be so, I should bless God for withdrawing me from this sad snare! I should hail death as my reward, for all the sacrifices which I have had the courage to impose upon myself.

"The fatal day arrived; that very morning my father renewed his orders. Oh! how sternly! and I, with a sort of chilling desolation which partook in some degree of indifference—I waited for the moment when I should be presented to M. Secherin.

"Despite the injunctions, despite the anger of my father, I had not paid the least attention to my dress. Heavens! whence could I have gained the courage to do so? I wore a black frock—too true indication of the thought that weighed upon my heart. My hair fell in long dishevelled curls about my face, which was pallid from despair. My whole figure was so bowed by the burthen of my sorrows, that Mademoiselle de Maran would surely have reproached me, and this time with justice, with being crooked and deformed.

"It was in vain that my father chid me harshly—ordered me to hold myself erect, and to put on a smiling aspect. I could not overcome the terrible emotions which assailed me, and scarcely could I muster resolution to turn my head, when M. Secherin and his mother were announced.

"M. Eloi Secherin is, as my father tells me, engaged in great speculations, and is augmenting daily the fortunes which his father left him. I can inform you nothing—no, nothing, either of his appearance or his manners; for I saw them only through a cloud of tears.

"But M. Eloi Secherin cannot be very difficult to please; for, after their departure, my father went so far as to congratulate me, and assure me that I had borne myself extremely well—been perfectly natural and unaffected, and that M. Secherin and his mother had left the house enchanted with me.

"I am like some poor prisoner, whose eyes have not gained the power to penetrate the darkness of the chill dungeon that confines her. I really scarce saw either M. Secherin or his mother; I have but a vague and indefinite idea of them. At best, I heard but a few words which they uttered, and even these mechanically. This very day, the marriage-contract will be signed; to-morrow, or the next day at the farthest, I shall be a wife.

"When, in a few days' time, thou wilt see me again in Paris—thou wilt open thine arms to receive a wretched victim, resigned indeed and obedient, but——

"Pardon me! pardon me! Matilda, for breaking in upon thy happiness—for a secret presentiment assures me that thou art happy, that *he* loves thee. Thou art aware of it since the ambassador's soiree. I have already told thee so. Thou, too, wilt love him; and sure I am, that even in becoming the object of that love, he must in consequence be worthy of it.

"Happy, happy Matilda! It is the certainty alone that thou wilt be happy that aids me to endure the wretched life that I am destined to drag out, until the burthen of my woes become too heavy for mortality to bear! then shall I quit this world of sorrow with but one feeling of regret, for those sweet years which I passed happily with thee.

"Farewell! farewell for the last time—a sorrowful farewell! One little moment, I dreamed of begging thee upon my knees to come and be present at my marriage, that from thy presence I might gain courage. But I thought better of it; I considered that the sight of thee, by reminding me of all that I must lose through this sad separation, would take away from me the little stock of courage that is left me. Farewell once more. When thou shalt see again thy wretched Ursula, thou wilt, I am assured, scarce recognise her.

"Farewell, oh! fare thee well! my spirit fails me from the excess of weeping! I am faint! Thine from my heart, oh! from the bottom of my heart, ever, for ever, thine.

"URSULA D'ORBEVAL."

When I had finished the perusal of that letter, I was indeed thunderstruck.

The thought which overcame all others was, that Ursula had literally, as she declared, sacrificed herself for me, fearing lest she should be an obstacle to my marriage with De Lancry.

I afterwards reproached my cousin for having so little confidence in my affection, or in that of Gontran. There reigned in all her written thoughts, so deep a sadness, a dejection so despairing, that I was seriously alarmed, fearing that she should fall ill from the excess of grief and languor.

I had but one hope. Something might have occurred to delay the marriage. I determined then, to beg Gontran, on the next day to set out for Touraine at once—to entreat my cousin to break off the terrible engagement, and himself to assure her that the performance of my promises could in no sort affect our marriage.

I passed an anxious and weary night. The next day I awaited with an unspeakable sense of excitement Gontran's arrival. He did not hesitate for a moment about setting forth; he understood, he partook of all my fears, my hopes for Ursula, and manifested such true kindness as made me almost adore him. Nothing remained but to acquaint Mademoiselle de Maran of his intentions, and to depart immediately. We were conversing on this interesting subject, when a letter was delivered to me from Tours.

Ursula was already married! Her letter, received the day before, had been delayed on the road.

That news appalled me! I was so happy in my love for Gontran, that I the better understood how wretched must be the lot of Ursula.

My cousin told me that in a few days she should arrive in Paris with her father and her husband, and should pass there the latter portion of the winter.

I had retired to my own room, intending to write to my cousin, and complain of her want of confidence—to console, to encourage, to point out to her those advantages which her grief had, perhaps, prevented her from discovering in her marriage; when I found Blondeau in my closet, she told me that a woman who had come to entreat my aid in a work of charity, was solicitous to see me.

I ordered her to be admitted, and beheld a woman wrapped in a mantle, her features covered by a thick, dark veil.

Blondeau left us alone together. The woman dropped her cloak, lifted her veil—It was the Duchesse de Richeville.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE INTERVIEW.

I WAS so much surprised, I may say so much frightened, at the sight of Madame de Richeville, that I was forced to lean for support on the back of an arm-chair, which stood near me. And yet the expression of her features had nothing threatening in its character, or even angry. She was, indeed, much altered in appearance, and had grown very thin; and, at this moment, she was herself much agitated, though her looks were full of regard and interest, if not affection.

She lost no time in speaking, as if to induce me to listen to her, and so to win my confidence.

"How strange soever you may conceive my visit, mademoiselle," she said, "I think it is in my power to reassure you. I come in the name of our mutual friend, M. de Mortagne."

"Is he then here, madam?"

"Alas! he is not; and, although momentarily expected to arrive—even so—I may not tell you one word of his mysterious voyage; but I know all the interest he feels for you. It is eight years ago, as he was coming from his last interview with Mademoiselle de Maran, that he described the whole to me. The family consultation!—the scene with your aunt, and how he took you up in his arms, and carried you into the chamber of Mademoiselle de Maran, in spite of the feeble baying of Felix. I go into these details, to show you that this man, this most generous of men, placed in me confidence unlimited. It is in the name of that confidence, then, mademoiselle, that I come to ask for yours."

"For mine, madam! *you!* and for my confidence?"

I laid so strong a stress on the word *you*, that Madame de Richeville smiled bitterly, as she replied, "Poor girl!—so youthful still. And do you believe already the slanders of the world? have they altered, annulled that charming kindness of the heart, which M. de Mortagne foresaw in you, and which your features still express? or why do you receive so coldly, advances dictated only by a desire of promoting your advantage—advances authorised, if I may so speak, by the man who was one of the best friends of your mother? Tell me—why do you thus receive me?"

It is impossible to describe the insinuating charm contained in every word, every accent of Madame de Richeville's voice; or to depict the look, affectionate at once and melancholy, with which she accompanied those words. Despite the meaningless jealousy which I entertained toward her, I was myself moved, and replied less drily than before,

"I cannot help wondering at a visit which I had surely no right to expect, not having the honour of madame's acquaintance."

"A few months since, while we were coming out of the opera-house, did not I say to you these words—'Poor child, beware!'"

"I certainly heard those words, madam; but I knew not to what end they were spoken."

"You knew not?" replied Madame de Richeville, fixing on me a look so penetrating that I felt myself blush deeply. But not wishing, I suppose, to increase my confusion, she continued to speak, her voice and expression, if that were possible, becoming more and more affectionate.

"Listen to me. In order to give you some cause for believing what I am about to say to you—in order that I may be able to embark on the subject which brings me hither, without the danger of exciting in your mind an after-thought of suspicion, I must give you some brief explanation of what has taken place before. As long as I can remember anything, M. de Mortagne has been my friend. He once rendered me one of those services which can never be recompensed by a generous spirit, except by the devotion of a life; and when I speak of friendship and devotion, I speak of the sacred duties which they comprise, not of mere empty names. I know not in what black and odious colours your aunt has painted me to you; but one day you will know, that my most deadly enemies have never ventured to deny my courage or devotion to my friends. Hereafter you will, perhaps, learn the motive of my eternal gratitude to M. de Mortagne. I know—I know the interest with which you have inspired him; now then, whatever he loves, I love too. Here, then, is a comprehensible motive, why I too should be interested in your welfare. Is it not so? I have, indeed, many bitter enemies kindled against me to the utmost; and, of all those, there is not one more implacable than your aunt, Mademoiselle de Maran. I know all that she has done to render your childhood miserable; now, too, she is plotting to make you the most wretched of women. You ought to hate her, as bitterly as I do myself: here is another reason for my interest. To rescue you from her base designs, to unveil to your eyes her new treacheries—in short, to prove my friendship and gratitude to M. de Mortagne, by doing toward you as he would have done himself,—these are the potent motives which urge me on in your behalf—sufficient, as I think."

"Madam," I answered, "I may have had cause, heretofore, to complain of Mademoiselle de Maran's conduct: but within the last few days she has done so much for me, that I ought to forget the little misunderstandings which occurred while I was yet a little girl."

I laid, intentionally, a strong accent on the words *has done so much for me*, in order to give Madame de Richeville clearly to understand that I alluded to my marriage with Gontran.

The duchess shook her head mournfully, and said,

"*Done so much for you!* It is, indeed, too true! never has she done before so much to insure your misery!"

From that moment I understood the motive of Madame de Richeville's visit. She loved Gontran; his proposed marriage with me had maddened her with jealousy: she was as clever in invention as in dissimulation. The purpose of her coming was to calumniate De Lancry, in order to break off a union which she dreaded.

The very instant in which this idea struck me, Gontran became dearer to me than ever, since I perceived how keenly the passion of his heart was disputed. I was, in fact, almost proud to see a woman so handsome, so high-spirited, so disdainful of the world's censure, having recourse to disguise, stooping to falsehoods the most shrewd and complicated, in order to come and play before me so base a part of mock humility.

Determined, then, to meet the conduct of the duchess in this light, I answered very drily,

"I repeat, madam, that, *of late*, I am profoundly and affectionately grateful toward Mademoiselle de Maran for all that she has done for me."

"It *must* seem so," Madame de Richeville answered; "and it is for that reason, and because you would otherwise fall finally into the snare which they have set for you, that I have come to you, unhappy girl that you are. You are abandoned by all—alone in the world: look around you, now that your only friend, your only protector, is afar—to whom can you apply for aid? in whom can you put any trust?"

"In no one, madam! you speak but too truly. In no one!"

"In no one—not even in me--would you say, Matilda? Oh! that is cruel—be not offended, I beseech you, at my familiarity. I am almost twice your age, and yet it is too true that I know not what to do, what to say, in order to break this icy coldness which freezes you against me. Forgive me, if I have addressed you in terms too affectionate. But, Heaven! in a moment such as this, can I tame down the warm impetus of my heart to the formalities of cold convention?"

It needed all the prejudice, all the stern jealousy with which I was imbued, to prevent me from being quite disarmed by the enchanting grace with which the duchess uttered these last words.

As always happens to a person in such a state of mind as I then was, some particular words either move me deeply, or disgust me, in proportion as they appear more like the utterance of the soul itself. I answered, therefore, to Madame de Richeville,

"I should be glad, madam, to learn the real object of this visit; for if it has no other one than to awaken ancient griefs between myself and Mademoiselle de Maran, even while I thank you for the interest which you bear me in the name of M. de Mortagne, I have only to reply, that, *at present*, I have nothing to say but in favour of Mademoiselle de Maran."

"It must be that you have already undergone much, since, even at the age of seventeen years, you have learned so much self-restraint as to be thus unmoved and self-possessed," said Madame de Richeville, gazing at me with a look of the tenderest melancholy; "or, if not so, your prejudices against me must be invincible indeed."

Then she went on, as if talking to herself—"What profits it—what profits it to try? what matters it? and yet it is a duty;" and then again addressing me, she said quickly, "It is a duty, and will be accomplished. They have determined to marry you to M. de Lancry!"

"Mademoiselle de Maran and the Duc de Versac have certainly consented to a resolution formed by myself and M. de Lancry, madam; and the marriage *is* decided on," I answered proudly, and triumphing, as it were, in the power of crushing *my rival* by these words, which were perhaps scarcely seemly in the mouth of a young girl.

"And do you know what M. de Lancry is?"

"Madam?——"

"Well, I will tell you—*I:* M. de Lancry is a most fascinating person; full of accomplishments, of talents, and of courage—of perfect manners, of finished elegance. All this you know already—is it not so, my poor child? This bright exterior has enchanted you. I blame you not for it. But, under that bright exterior, he conceals a cold and arid heart; a selfishness that nothing can divert from its object; an insatiable avarice, which seeks to glut itself by a rage for play. Long since, he has wasted his whole fortune; he is in debt, and that desperately. Oh! believe me, Matilda, Mademoiselle de Maran has facilitated—has, indeed, brought about this marriage, in order to plunge you into an abyss of misery. Therefore it is, that I conjure you to wait for your true friend, M. de Mortagne. I conjure you, in his name! It cannot be far distant—await it, ere you complete this engagement. You know not the nature of the man whom you have chosen. Once more, for the last time, I entreat you to wait for the return of M. de Mortagne—wait for it, in the name of your mother!"

"It is enough, madam!" I exclaimed, indignantly. "I will not endure to hear the name of my mother invoked, to give weight to calumnies to which you are not ashamed to debase yourself. You—you, Madame la Duchesse! Alas! madam, what have I ever done to you, that you seek to poison that which I did regard, that which I still regard—God hears the words I utter!—as the sole happiness, the sole hope of my life? Alas! I shudder even now with dread—for, uttered by any other mouth than yours, it may be that these words would have shaken in some degree the confidence, the admiration—yea, the love, which I feel for M. de Lancry."

"You would, then, have believed these words, had they been uttered by any other than I," replied Madame de Richeville, looking attentively at my face, and endeavouring, as it seemed, there to read my thoughts; "why should you place less confidence in me than in another?"

"Why—do you ask me? This, madam, this concerns M. de Lancry. Alone, as I am in the world, certain reports——"

"Ah! wretched, wretched girl!" Madame de Richeville interrupted me, in accents of surprise, almost of terror; "she thinks me jealous of M. de Lancry. Then all is lost, indeed! You believe this, Matilda! My God! my God! bitterly, then, must I have been calumniated, if you can really believe me guilty of such baseness! In love, myself, with M. de Lancry—you fancy I have come to slander him to you, in order to break off a marriage which would reduce me to despair? Say—say—is it this that you believe of me?"

"Forgive my answering your question, madam."

"Is it so?" she replied, with a look of anguish; "then I will make you a confession, painful as it is—oh! cruel to me—but what matters it? it may save you."

After a long pause of hesitation, Madame de Richeville spoke again; but when she did so, her voice was strangely altered, and even broken. She blushed deeply, and again turned very pale, and exhibited, both in her face and manner, every sign of embarrassment and confusion.

"Learn, then, that I, like you, once loved De Lancry! Yes—like you, I was fascinated by the brilliant charms of his exterior. But, too soon, I discovered that when his vanity was once satisfied, nothing remained within but selfishness, indifference, harshness—and cruelty. Yes, cruelty, indeed! so that, to-day, I know not which has the mastery of my soul, hatred or utter scorn."

These last words of Madame de Richeville appeared to me so odious, that losing all control of myself, I exclaimed,

"And, notwithstanding this, at the ball of the Austrian ambassador—you seem to have forgotten that, madam!"

Madame de Richeville shrugged her shoulders at my words, with an impatient motion.

"Listen to me, then—you shall learn why I so acted at that ball; and by so doing you will know M. de Lancry. It is nearly a year since, that I experienced a severe calamity. I was one of the most miserable of women. Oh! may you never know, Matilda, that it is suffering which makes us weak May you never be so unfortunate as to know the perilous fascination that lies in a friendly voice, which pities and consoles us in affliction. I trusted to the protestations of M. de Lancry. I loved him truly and devotedly. I was the best, the tenderest of friends to him. I lived, at that time, in almost absolute retirement; endeavouring only to anticipate his thoughts, his wishes. One day, he came not near me. I became uneasy. I sent to his house. He had set off for London without writing me one word; and giving all the world to understand that he was following to England some opera girl, whom he had established within a few days as my rival. This conduct was so base, so brutal, that my anger fell upon myself. I was indignant at the idea, that I should have been the dupe of such a man. Almost to my astonishment, the haughtiest and most absolute indifference succeeded to a sentiment which, on the previous day, I really deemed immortal. There are some outrages so base, that they call forth, not anger, but compassion, for the miserable wretch who offers them. When I met M. de Lancry at the ball of the ambassador, I saw him for the first time since he sacrificed me so basely. In spite of all his bold and confident assurance, he was embarrassed—while I felt nothing—nothing but the desire of letting him perceive my contempt, by receiving him in the terms of intimate familiarity which are authorised only by ancient friendship. My vengeance went no further. But to a man of M. de Lancry's character—and, to say, the truth, to men in general—nothing is so cutting as to perceive a smile of scornful indifference on the lips of a victim, whom, in their vanity, they fancy death-stricken by their perjury.

"I have told you with what interest M. de Mortagne has spoken of you to me; and I was looking at you with affectionate curiosity, when Mademoiselle de Maran thrust herself forward, in order to address to me some barbarous words, of which you could not comprehend the double meaning. I had enough self-command to make her no reply except by informing her of a fact, which I knew would strike her with terror—the arrival of M. de Mortagne, which I knew to a certainty; he has been the victim of abominable machinations. Before long, you will see him."

"Good heavens! madam," I replied, "what does this mean?"

"I cannot tell you yet," replied Madame de Richeville, "but he will soon be here. It is on this account that I implore you to wait for him before you complete this wretched marriage. A few words more," added the duchess, perceiving my impatience, "and I leave you! The very evening of the ball at the embassy, the intentions of your aunt and M. de Versac ceased to be a secret. It was whispered, on all sides, that the duke had recalled his nephew from England in order to avail himself of this proffered rich marriage. When the next day I saw you at the opera, in the box of the Gentlemen of the Bedchamber, I had no longer any doubt on the subject. Your aunt and M. de Versac had purposely confirmed this rumour, by placing you in a great public box at the opera, in close contact with M. de Lancry, in order to prevent any other person from approaching you. Mademoiselle de Maran well knew that another young gentleman—of whom I shall speak to you by and by, and in whom M. de Mortagne feels a lively interest—having seen you at the embassy, where you made a deep impression on him, intended to propose for your hand. I perceived the danger which you ran, and in coming out of the opera-house I said to you, 'Poor child, beware!' but it was not my intention to limit myself to that barren hint. It was my intention to have told you that which I am now telling you, before M. de Lancry should have made any impression on your heart; for, gifted with the advantages which he undoubtedly possesses, and favoured in his suit by your aunt, I felt that he could not fail to please you. Unhappily, the very day following the opera I was taken ill—and then became so much worse, that it was impossible to fulfil my wish. In that extremity, I opened my heart to Madame de Mirecourt, one of my friends who often sees your aunt, and who undertook to speak to you in private, to give you information touching this marriage which they were planning for you, and to entreat you to await the return of M. de Mortagne. Your aunt, it seems, suspected Madame de Mirecourt, whose intimacy with me she well knew, and hindered her before seeing you in private. Then, more than ever, I cursed the sufferings which prevented me from seeing you myself. Daily, I felt your love for De Lancry must needs be increasing. I wished to write you, but feared that your aunt would intercept my letter. I was in despair when I thought that, perchance, had you been warned in time, you would not have thus ruined all your future hopes. I felt so deep an interest in you, that the thought cut me to the heart! But, alas! even now I see in your coldness, Matilda, that I convince you not. In your distrust of me, you ask yourself, I know, incessantly—what can explain this powerful interest in your welfare? My God! must I again repeat to you, that by endeavouring to save you, I discharge an obligation to M. de Mortagne?"

"And, at the same time, madam," I replied bitterly, "avenge yourself on M. de Lancry."

"Avenge myself, Matilda!" answered the duchess mildly; "and is it absolutely necessary that I must be instigated by such a feeling, before I can entertain affection or compassion for you? Would not the hardest heart break, to behold a poor young thing like you—so beautiful, so interesting—abandoned to your fate, betrayed by a clique of vile egotists—becoming, after all, the victim of your aunt's hatred and M. de Lancry's avarice?"

"It is too much, madam!" I exclaimed violently, for my pride was wounded. "Am I then altogether so ill-favoured and ungifted, that M. de Lancry can have no motive but my fortune, why he should ask my hand? If he have deceived you—*odiously* deceived you, if you will—is that a reason why he should not appreciate a heart that is entirely his own? And who tells you, madam, that you loved him, as he deserves to be loved? and who tells you, that all the women put together, whom he has, as you say, basely deceived, ever loved him as deeply as I do?—and who tells you, I say, that it is not the very greatness and nobleness of his soul that causes him to mark the distance which intervenes between a guilty and illicit love, and an affection consecrated in the eyes of man and God?—and by what right do you—you who confess yourself guilty of a crime—accuse him of cowardice and baseness? By what right do you dare to set your love in comparison with mine?"

"Oh God! oh God! to hear such words as these!" exclaimed Madame de Richeville, hiding her face in her hands, with an expression of humiliation and of sorrow which must have moved me, had I not been so thoroughly indignant. But, alas! at the moment I could not moderate my language, and I gave way to a cruel wrath, which I regret, even to this moment. Carried away by the desire of avenging Gontran's wrongs, which I believed him to be suffering at her hands, I went on with fluent vehemence—

"You say that he has no fortune—that he has dissipated all; the better, I reply, madam, the better! I am twice happy that I am enabled to give him mine! He has lost all at play, you tell me—now that he is rich, he will have no more need to fly to that resource. You think that he deceives me; be satisfied, madam, be satisfied—envy and jealousy will oftentimes mistake their own malicious hopes for foresight! True love is happier—strong in its own devotion, in its own generosity; it certainly foresees the recompense which it deserves, and which it will obtain!"

Madame de Richeville raised her lovely face, which, to my great surprise, was covered with tears, and absolutely convulsed with passionate grief.

I confess to you, my friend, that when I beheld that woman, commonly so proud and disdainful, listening calmly and submissively to my reproaches—despite my indignation, I felt emotions which I could repress only by a powerful effort.

She took my hand, which I had not courage to draw away from her, and said to me very sadly, "It is done, then, Matilda—there is no hope, any more. You are the victim of a false pride—the same false pride which ruined me—which ruins half our sex! I too—when I loved De Lancry—I too said to myself, 'Am I not fairer, am I not more fascinating than my rivals? They have not had the power to rivet that inconstant heart, to tame that fiery and haughty character, which sports with the most devoted feelings. But I—I shall succeed.' Alas! Matilda, I have told you my shame and its punishment! And imagine not, that I wish to compare myself for one instant with you—that I presume to think that I could bear off from you the palm of personal beauty! that I could dream of competing with that rare assemblage of high qualities that mark you. It is that very loveliness—those very qualities, which I had well-nigh divined before I knew them, that rendered me more anxious to serve the protegé of M. de Mortagne—without considering the bearing of your words, my poor child, you have but now made me too deeply feel the difference between that love which I had to offer to M. de Lancry, and that which you have given to him. You are in the right, Matilda. If M. de Lancry could have been touched by all that there is angelic and adorable in your love for him, you might have realised the happiness of which you have but dreamed. But trust me," she continued, dropping her voice almost to a whisper, and casting a glance at me through her tears, which seemed to go directly to my heart—"trust me, however guilty may be the love—whatever may be the nature of a woman who loves and adores sincerely, no man of devoted heart and noble character will respond to the proofs of that deep attachment by insults or by cruelty. Such conduct surely tells of an evil nature! And yet, Matilda, perhaps you are right, without your own knowledge of it. Perhaps you are destined to change completely the character of M. de Lancry. Certainly—if grace, beauty, amiability, I had almost said perfection, could work marvels in your favour, you will succeed. But, alas! believe me, if I had entertained the slightest hope that such a conversion were even possible, I should have deemed it a crime to disturb your credence, your faith in his love! After all, it is the future only, that can decide! Farewell, Matilda, farewell! one day perhaps you will know me better. One day perhaps, my poor child, you will say to me with bitter penitence, 'Why did I doubt your truth!' But, bear me witness, God! rather would I remain, in your opinion, such as you think me now—a wicked and perfidious woman—than see my prediction realised in your misfortunes. Farewell! once more, farewell! For the last time—will you not await the return of M. de Mortagne?"

"Madam," I answered, moved at length by the tears of the duchess, "I entreat you, let us break off this interview. Words have escaped me which I regret—sincerely, oh! how sincerely! At least let them prove to you, by the passion with which I have defended M. de Lancry, that my heart belongs to him for ever."

"One more last word, and I leave you," said Madame de Richeville: "that which I am about to say can in no wise alter your resolution; but I must not suffer you to be in ignorance of the projects of M. de Mortagne, which regard yourself. Before his departure for Italy, thinking of your future life, he had, as I have told you, spoken of a marriage between yourself and the son of one of his best friends, M. Ulrik de Rochegune, who was then about twenty years of age, and whose fortune would be considerable. At that time the young man appeared to M. de Mortagne to be a match worthy of you. *Now* M. de Rochegune, by the death of his father—one of the noblest characters of his times—is the possessor of vast fortunes. He has just returned from a foreign tour, and every one unites in speaking highly of his intellect and qualities: without being handsome, his countenance is full of intelligence and character. He saw you at the ambassador's ball, was struck by your beauty, and had it not been for the affectation with which Mademoiselle de Maran paraded your marriage in advance, with M. de Lancry, M. de Rochegune would have sought to be presented to you. Had M. de Mortagne been here, he would have introduced to you his protegé. I tell you this, Matilda, to let you understand that your determination not to await the return of your only friend, before completing your marriage, may be the more afflicting to him, that he had views in which he believed your happiness was involved."

"I wish M. de Mortagne were here, whose goodness I shall never forget, in order that I might answer him that I have made an honourable choice, and that no consideration should hinder me from marrying M. de Lancry," I answered, with that inflexible obstinacy of will which is a characteristic of strong love, blinded and heightened at the same time by opposition.

"Farewell!" then, Matilda," said Madame de Richeville, with a penetrating accent; "give me, at least, the assurance that you believe in the disinterestedness of my advances; that will console me somewhat for the grief I feel at having been unable to convince you; tell me that you will not preserve an unkind opinion of my motives."

I was upon the point of answering her, when Blondeau entered the room abruptly.

Madame de Richeville dropped her veil.

"Mademoiselle," said Blondeau, "Mademoiselle de Maran begs that you will go down to her immediately."

Madame de Richeville made me a modest courtesy, and withdrew.

And now, my friend, I know beyond the possibility of doubting, that Madame de Richeville was actuated by no odious retrospective feelings, when she thus spoke to me. She felt, in truth, the affectionate compassion which she professed. Her gratitude toward M. de Mortagne, and the interest which she felt in my situation, had been the only motives of her advance.

You must know, my friend, that this woman is a strange union of contradictions. She passes half her life in deploring the faults which she has committed, and that from the bottom of her soul! and without hypocrisy! Her high position—her proud, haughty character, would render all hypocrisy as impossible, as it would be useless to her.

No! she is one of those peculiar creatures, potent for evil as for good. She came from the hands of her Maker pure, noble, great. Education, the world—the life which others have cut out for her, far more than her own evil inclinations, have made her guilty. Still there are in her such countervailing qualities; her intellect is so clear-sighted; her judgment is so superior; her heart has remained so good, her soul so generous, that, elevating herself at times from the midst of melancholy recollections and sincere repentance, she raises to heaven a glance of supplication, not unmingled with despair, while she casts to the earth a smile of bitterness and scorn.

At another time, my friend, I will tell you some admirable traits of conduct in this woman, who has unquestionably had her errors, but who has been always most unjustly slandered. I will tell you, then, of her dreadful marriage, which might have alone sufficed to cast her into the abyss, from which she has emerged, purified by the expiation of her sufferings.

Judge, therefore, of the remorse which oppresses me, when I remember the disdainful harshness with which I met her advances, dictated as they were by the kindest interest: I dare not, as yet, say by the most fatal foresight.

Scarcely had Madame de Richeville left me, before I went to seek my aunt, and the first person that I perceived with her was Gontran.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE JUSTIFICATION.

When I saw M. de Lancry, I could scarce hinder myself from blushing, when I thought of the calumnies to which I believed him a victim.

"I have sent for you, Matilda," said my aunt, "because Gontran here is stunning me with questions about the *corbeille*.* He is asking me what your taste is; what sets of jewels you wish to have. It would be much better that you should tell him than I; then settle it between you; here are writing materials."

And she pointed, as she spoke, to her writing-desk, for we were in the library.

At the same moment Servien entered, saying to his mistress,

"Mademoiselle, M. Bisson is in the drawing-room."

"And you have left him there alone! He will break everything to pieces!" cried Mademoiselle de Maran, hurrying out to prevent, if possible, some new misdeed of the *savan;* who, after some time spent in banishment and disfavour, had just recovered her good graces.

I was alone with Gontran; but, hesitating whether I should tell him of Madame de Richeville's visit or not, I kept silence.

"I am very glad that Mademoiselle de Maran has left us," said Gontran, "for I want to speak with you very seriously."

"About the *corbeille?*" I replied, smiling.

"No!" he said with a grave voice, which went to my heart. "Yesterday, I spoke to you of the future—of my prospects, of my sentiments. You believed me; you were willing to confide to me the care of your happiness; you were so generous as to pledge me your word. Yesterday, in the delight which that unexpected success caused me, I did not think of speaking to you of the past; and yet the past is always an omen either of good or evil for the future. Just now a scruple has occurred to me. You are an orphan; your aunt is an intimate friend of my uncle, the Duke de Versac;

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* The *corbeille* (or basket) is a French marriage present, of jewels, &c., made by the bridegroom's relations to the lady—as the *trousseau* is the collection of dresses, &c., furnished by her own family.

she is full of the most favourable opinions in my behalf. If I have any faults, any vices, it is not she—it is M. de Versac who will inform you of them. Am I not right? But you have shown yourself so confiding, so true-hearted toward me, that the nobleness of your conduct imposes duties on me. You are alone: you are surrounded by persons who love you, who have unquestionably presented me to your most favourable notice. It remains, then, for me frankly to enlighten you with regard to my faults—with regard to whatever there may have been blameable or guilty in my past life. I will do so without exaggerating the evil, and yet with strict severity Thereafter, you will judge if I am worthy of you: and even if my misfortune should cause these revelations to destroy the dearest hopes of my life, I shall have at least the consolation of having acted as becomes a man of honour."

In proportion as M. de Lancry spoke sincerely, so did I feel myself moved with surprise and tenderness. Gontran, by a chance that seemed almost miraculous, had actually met half-way the thoughts which had been excited in my bosom by the words of Madame de Richeville.

The instinct of his heart had warned him to justify himself beforehand on those points whereon he found himself liable to attack.

His frankness charmed me, and I awaited his disclosures with more curiosity than uneasiness. Indeed, I felt myself so completely reassured, that I said to him, smiling,

"I listen to you; but if it is a confession, be upon your guard. I may not be able to hear the whole."

"I swear to you, however, that nothing is more serious," replied Gontran. "Now that I cast back a glance upon the past, now that I have seen you—now, above all, that I have been enabled to compare my impressions of former times with my impressions of the present, my life appears to me in a very different light. Yes! certain thoughts, which have hitherto been confused and vague, develop themselves now clearly to my comprehension. I understand, now, the sort of restlessness, of impatient fretfulness, which has been wont to blight or to cut short those passing and short-lived attachments which once seemed so seductive. The farther I advanced in life, the better I began to comprehend the emptiness, the bitterness of such affections. I sought for quiet happiness, for calm, for a repose of the heart,—I found only excitement, agitating and ever painful. The women who had sacrificed their duty in my favour, perhaps, after long struggles, experienced a degree of remorse that often made me curse the happiness they gave me; while yet I was more disgusted by the effrontery of those who had forgotten how to blush. And yet, I whispered to myself—and yet there must be a happiness all different from this!

In my despair of attaining the necessary end, to which all the faculties of my soul were directed, I very shortly broke the idols to which I had but now burnt incense. I experienced a sort of malicious pleasure at making them partake that bitterness of soul, in which they had steeped me to the very lips. Perhaps I carried this feeling to the length of cruelty. Ought I then to accuse myself? I know not—perhaps it would be more just to accuse the ideal which inspired my waking dreams. Yes! for that it was which rendered me so unjust, so severe to all which did not resemble its perfection. If you should ask the world about me, Matilda, it would tell you, that I have shown myself, in the breaking off some of these amours, selfish, disdainful, cruel. That, too, is true. I was dissatisfied with myself. I was impatient to escape the bonds of a false happiness; wishing to find that true one which ever seemed to escape me. Those ideas which most rarely, or perhaps never occur to us, are oftentimes the simplest. I was very far, then, from imagining, that the unknown goal, which I was struggling so ardently to reach, was to be found in married life. Had any one, at that time, so explained to me the aspirations which possessed me, I should have laughed him to scorn.

"When I saw you, Matilda, a bandage as it were fell from my eyes. Yes, the present reveals to me the meaning of the past! When I saw you, that which I had formerly dreamed of in darkness, appeared to me in distinct light! Disdaining guilty thoughts, I then paid homage, if I may so express myself, to that pure sacred sentiment for which my heart, with all its secret instincts, was crying out, and which you only were destined to make me know."

I remained stupefied with wonder and admiration, when I heard Gontran thus explaining what had gone before.

You will remark, my friend, that, by a singular coincidence, he defended himself by the self-same arguments which I had advanced against Mademoiselle de Richeville's accusations.

You will perceive, then, how forcibly the arguments of Gontran must have struck me. What woman, already loving a man to infatuation, could fail to believe him when he should say to her, "I love you! I shall love you all the more, in proportion as I have disdained and outraged all that was different of your sex from you!" Tell me, my friend, would there be a more dangerous paradox? Does it not, in fact, by means of a fatal shrewdness, or rather of a profound knowledge of the human heart, build up, as it were, a pedestal of all the treasons previously committed, to place thereon the goddess of the highest adoration?

Is not this paradox, moreover, the more dangerous, when the woman so exalted feels within herself, that she in no respect resembles the women who have been sacrificed to her? and was it not in this position that I was placed with regard to Gontran?

Alas! was it so evil a self-pride, to believe my devotion, my love for him, superior to all the love, all the devotedness, that he had ever met before?

Gontran appeared to me so completely exculpated of all the accusations of Madame de Richeville, that I perceived I ought not to speak to him of the visit of the duchess. I thought, too, that she might have come to see me, actuated by a real wish to serve me. She was the friend of M. de Mortagne; and this last reason would have sufficed alone to make me keep her secret.

Gontran watched me for a while with an uneasy air, ignorant what effect his words had produced on me.

I offered my hand to him, with a smile: "Let us talk now," I said, "of *our* future prospects."

He shook his head sadly, and replied, "How good and generous you are! but I must not as yet say *us*, in speaking of you and myself. I have yet more confessions to make to you."

"Well, then, be quick," I answered, "be quick, and confess the whole. Let us see—what is the question now? You have played deep?—have you been a prodigal?—your fortune is squandered? Are these the terrible confessions which you have got to make?" And then I added, with a smile, "Come, do I not talk to you like an old indulgent grandmamma?"

"For pity's sake, jest not, Matilda," he answered; "it is too true—for a time I played desperately. Yes! in that resource I sought for emotions which I found not elsewhere. Disgusted by the effrontery I met in some of my love affairs—terrified by the remorse of which I was the cause in others—having nothing to attach me to life—having no future to which to look forward beyond the coming day—feeling my heart oppressed—blushing alike for myself and others—desperate of ever finding that happiness which filled my dreams—loving nothing—regretting nothing—I plunged into the gulf of chance! But the barren excitement of play, its convulsive agonies and sordid hopes, soon wearied me. Playing to gain forgetfulness, and not to win, I certainly lost heavily, and my fortune suffered by it; it was before embarrassed by the great expenses which I was obliged to meet, in order to sustain my rank befittingly in the embassy to which I was attached. Nevertheless, at this moment I possess——"

"Ah! not a word more!" I exclaimed, with a reproachful voice. "Can you talk to me thus? Do you imagine that I could consider, for one moment, what you do or do not possess? Did you, yourself, give a thought to the gift which, had I made it to my cousin, as I proposed, would have reduced my fortune to one half—although her sacrifice rendered it needless?"

"But yet, Matilda——"

"Let us speak of the *corbeille*," said I, with a smile; "or, rather, let us talk of things more important still. Let us talk of our future life. When we leave my aunt's house, whither shall we go? Let us see, let us see, sir; have you even so much as asked me in what part of the town I should like to live? Let me inform you of my taste in the arrangement of our dwelling."

"Matilda, I should like to see you more serious in matters of interest."

"You wish to see me serious? Very well," I replied, with an expression of the sincere gratitude which I felt; "very well, suffer me to tell you how *seriously* happy I was at receiving yesterday, in the depth of winter, that beautiful basket of jasmine and heliotrope. Believe me, this is in truth more serious than mere business matters. In these there is something more than figures—there is a sentiment, a presage. What did I say?—a presage rather a certainty of future happiness! Oh, yes! the heart reveals itself in the smallest things; and the man who has shown so much delicacy on one occasion, will not fail on another. These flowers, which have been the first mark of your feelings, will always remain to my thoughts a symbol of my happiness! Oh! to begin, I shall be very exacting! Every morning I shall insist on having a basket full of flowers; but I must tell you that my heart awakens very early, and that a thought of you will have anticipated the arrival of the bouquet!"

"It is upon my knees—it is upon my knees that I ought to adore you, Matilda! How should I fail to devote the whole of my lifetime to your happiness? He must be the most wretched and most base of men, who would not promise before God to render you the happiest of women."

"Oh! I believe you, Gontran. I have too much trust in my own love, not to place a blind confidence in yours. Why should you deceive me? Gifted as you are, could you not find a thousand other girls who would love you?—not better than I do—there I defy them! but who would have more charms to offer you? I place all trust in what you have told me, Gontran, because I know that you are generous and true. All that you have just told me of your past life, at the risk of displeasing me, at the risk perhaps of losing me for ever, is but a proof to me of your sincerity."

What shall I tell you more, my friend? The rest of my conversation with M. de Lancry turned on the projects of future life. Our marriage was to be celebrated as soon as the necessary formalities could be accomplished. The king was to affix his signature to the contract, and Gontran was to take the orders of his majesty upon the subject.

We conversed with extreme satisfaction about our future arrangements; about our house; the seasons which we would pass in Paris, in travelling, or upon our estates.

Gontran spoke to me of a charming *hotel* as our residence, situated in the faubourg St. Honoré, and overlooking the Champs Elysées. We resolved to go and see it with Mademoiselle de Maran.

He begged me also to learn to ride on horseback, in order that we might take long rides together in the country, and that I might be able to accompany him in hunting, of which he was passionately fond. We even laid down rules by which to approximate our expenses; and Gontran, who had always been extremely lavish, talked to me very seriously about a reasonable degree of economy. "While he had been a single man," he said, "these ideas of order had never once occurred to him; but now he perceived all the necessity of it." There can be nothing more delightful than this consideration of future projects—than these plans for the time to come—now solemn, and now joyous. My early youth had passed so sadly in the house of Mademoiselle de Maran—I had always lived hitherto so completely as a little child—that I could scarcely believe the happiness that awaited me.

Two or three days after this conversation, Gontran came to see us one morning—Mademoiselle de Maran, I mean, and myself—in order to take us to look at the *hotel* in the faubourg St. Honoré, about which he had spoken to me.

After a few moments' conversation, Mademoiselle de Maran said, speaking of the house which Gontran desired to buy,

"Stay! stay! Is it not the Hotel Rochegune, of which we are talking?"

"Yes, madam," replied De Lancry, "it is a splendid opportunity. The old Marquis de Rochegune died last year; his son, Abel de Rochegune, on his return from travelling, had made great improvements in it, intending to live there; but, as he is very feeble, he changed his mind very suddenly, and now wishes to get rid of it."

"He takes after his family, then," said Mademoiselle de Maran, "for there never was a greater original or a more insupportable person than his father."

"Yet every one speaks of him with veneration, madam," answered Gontran, apparently surprised.

"Well! well!" cried Mademoiselle de Maran, with a kind of sardonic laugh, "he was a sort of old idiot, a kind of philosopher, a dreamer of dreams, and above all, a mad philanthropist, for ever groping about in the jails and bagnios, where he suffered himself to be plundered by *messieurs* the thieves, and *messieurs* the robbers, whom he was for ever embracing, and calling his *brothers*—God save the mark! which must have been extremely pleasant for his family! In addition to which, this abominable man, when he had just come forth from receiving their Judas kisses, had the further delightful quality of embracing you on the slightest pretext of relationship or friendship; neither more nor less than if you had been one of his *dear brothers*, the galley-slaves!"

"But, madam, he has founded, as I understand, an almshouse for the poor on one of his estates."

"I know it very well—that is another of his abominations!"

"How so, madam?" asked Gontran.

"He founded it, in order to obtain the right of tyrannising over a heap of old vagabonds, who were entirely dependent on him. One can have no idea of the contrivances of that horrid man to torture those miserable people. To amuse himself, he made them eat wolves, and bats, and rats; he beat them to a mummy; made them work eighteen hours a-day, at all sorts of tasks, from which he derived great profit; so that it was well understood, that this almshouse, as it was called, was in reality a very productive farm, to say nothing of the reputation of charity which it produced him, and which served as a sort of cloak for all kinds of shameful actions."

Although I had no reason to be particularly interested in the memory of M. de Rochegune, I was yet disgusted by the malignity of my aunt. I gave Gontran a glance which made him understand my feelings, and he seemed no less shocked than I.

"I think, madam," said he to my aunt, "you must have been misinformed, and that—"

"Not at all—not at all," she interrupted him. "I know perfectly well what I say. He was a disagreeable wretch, if I were to judge of him only by his friendships. He had for a disciple a sort of relation of ours, on the side of my sister-in-law—God be thanked for him! who was worth little more than he: M. de Mortagne!"

"M. de Mortagne? that old soldier of the empire—that traveller, as original as he is indefatigable!" said Gontran. "Indeed, I did not know that he had the honour of belonging to your family."

"Yes indeed! we have that *honour*—at least we had it!"

"How, madam, is M. de Mortagne dead?" asked Gontran.

"Dead! Great God!" exclaimed I, catching hold of Mademoiselle de Maran's hand in very great anxiety. She looked at me with a rude and ironical expression, and said, laughing in her harsh, hissing manner,

"Ha—ha—ha! See the emotion of Matilda! Well! yes, he is dead—it was in doubt for a few days, but now it is certain."

"Ah, madam," I replied very bitterly, "may you deceive yourself!"

"Deceive myself, indeed! Well! where would be the great harm if this hero of the barrack-room were dead? A Jacobin!—one of those perilous trouble-worlds, who, to promote the *march* of intellect, as they called it, care not if they march knee-deep in blood!"

"Madam," said I, "I am a mere woman, and take small account of political opinions—but so long as I have no proof of the misfortune which you mention, it will be always with an impatient gratitude that I shall look for the arrival of M. de Mortagne—and when I can no longer doubt the fatal news, I shall ever preserve the fondest and most pious veneration for his memory!"

"Very well, my dear, you can commence this pious preservation of yours as soon as you please, I tell you. But let us talk no more of this man," said Mademoiselle de Maran, with an imperious accent. "Living or dead, I abhor him!"

Then turning to Gontran—

"And this son of old Rochegune, what sort of person is he?"

"He is a man of whom people hardly know how to say enough. He has arrived here but very lately. He has spoken once in the Chamber of Peers, in a very striking manner, it is said, although in a very evil spirit. I have met him a few times in the world, although he goes out but rarely. He had, while he was in Spain, an adventure, at the same time terrible and romantic, which made a great noise, and in which, to tell the truth, he behaved with all the chivalrous honour and heroical devotion of the old Moors of Grenada. He was left for dead, pierced with I know not how many dagger-wounds. It was his business to save the reputation of a lady, and—" but he interrupted himself with a smile, and added—"but I will not tell it before Mademoiselle Matilda—I will relate the whole by-and-by to Madame de Lancry."

"Heavens!" replied Mademoiselle de Maran; "it is a hero of romance, then, that we are going to see!"

"Almost, mademoiselle—but I have great doubts whether we shall see him. He offered at first, with great eagerness, to show us his house, and to place himself at our disposal; but then he corrected himself, saying that he should not be able to do the honours properly himself, and begged me to make you his excuses."

CHAPTER XX.

THE VISIT.

When I learned that we were going to the house of M. de Rochegune, I was exceedingly annoyed at the position in which we were about to be placed. It was he of whom Madame de Richeville had spoken to me, to the effect that M. de Mortagne had wished me to marry him. Now, therefore, I reproached myself bitterly for my first breach of confidence toward Gontran. If I had told of the interview which had taken place between Madame de Richeville and myself, I should have been able to explain to him the sort of dread I had of meeting M. de Rochegune.

We arrived, and I was very glad to learn that M. de Rochegune was not at home; the sight of him would, unquestionably, have confused me much. The steward, however, showed us through the house, which seemed perfectly to suit the taste of M. de Lancry.

The ground-floor, intended for the chambers of reception, was in perfect taste, and singularly elegant; but we remarked one room, delightfully situated, the walls of which were quite bare, without either hanging or panelling. It opened partly upon the garden, and partly on a hothouse.

"Why is this room unfurnished, and this only?" asked Gontran.

"Because M. de Rochegune intended this room for his bride, and wished that she should arrange it to her own taste," replied the steward.

"M. de Rochegune intended, then, to marry?" asked Gontran.

"I presume so, Monsieur le Comte; for that is the reason which the architect gave me, when I asked him why this room was left unfurnished."

"See, now," said Gontran, turning to me, "without intending it, M. de Rochegune has been full of foresight; do you not think so? I shall be delighted if this room pleases you, for the purpose to which it has been destined. If so, we can arrange it at our pleasure."

"Certainly—it is charming," I replied; but I could not avoid blushing as I spoke; and while Gontran was carefully examining all these departments, what Madame de Richeville had told me came vividly upon my mind. While the steward spoke of M. de Rochegune's intended marriage, I could not help reflecting that it was myself, probably, to whom this related. I wish to impress this circumstance on your mind; because, when you call it to mind hereafter, you will be struck by its strange consequences.

We went up to the first floor; and, having reached a large ante-chamber, the steward perceived that he had forgotten a key, belonging to an apartment arranged as a library, and returned to find it.

In the mean time, actuated by a harmless curiosity, we entered, with Gontran, a little gallery of modern pictures. At the end of this gallery was a double door, of red velvet; one of its leaves being open, gave us a sight of an inner door, which was closed.

While we were examining the pictures, we had insensibly approached the door, when Gontran stopped short, and said, with an air of surprise,

"There is some one there; they are talking aloud within. I thought M de Rochegune had gone out."

Scarcely had M. de Lancry spoken, when some one cried out, in the inner room, in tones which sounded almost like a supplication, "I beseech you, sir, to be silent—we shall be overheard; there are persons here, and I have given orders that I should be denied."

"That is the voice of M. de Rochegune, surely," said Gontran.

"This becomes singularly interesting," replied Mademoiselle de Maran; "we are on the eve of making some terrible discovery. I have no doubt the son is just as bad as the father was."

"Let us withdraw," said I, quickly, to De Lancry—but we had not the time, for another voice cried out to M. de Rochegune, "Some one, then, is there! so much the better, sir; all that I ask is, that I can be heard. Praised be the Providence that sends me witnesses."

"You will see directly," said Mademoiselle de Maran, drawing yet nearer to the door, "that this is some deposit of money entrusted to the elder De Rochegune, in his character of philanthropist, which the son is denying like a madman."

"Once more, monsieur, I entreat you," said M. de Rochegune; "what are you about to do?"

At this moment the door flew open violently—a man rushed out, and cried, on seeing us, "God be praised, here *is* some one!"

What was my surprise to recognise M. Dupré, whom Gontran had pointed out to us at the opera-house, telling us the exemplary conduct of this young man, who had concealed his ruin from his kind mother, by dint of constant industry! The other person was M. de Rochegune: he was tall, and very pale; but that which struck me most, in his countenance, was the melancholy and almost stern expression of his large black eyes.

Gontran made M. de Rochegune a thousand apologies for our involuntary intrusion; but M. Dupré cried out vehemently, as he saw us, "Ah! monsieur and mesdames—it is Heaven that sends you hither, in order that you may, at least, witness my gratitude to my benefactor."

"Monsieur, I beseech you," said M. de Rochegune, much embarrassed.

I looked at my aunt. Up to this moment, her features had worn an expression of triumphant mockery. But, at these words, she looked annoyed and spiteful, and sat down in an arm-chair with an ironical smile.

"Monsieur," continued M. de Rochegune, addressing M. Dupré, "I formally command you to be silent! and that instantly!"

"To be silent?" exclaimed M. Dupré, with an explosion of gratitude, which might be called furious—"to be silent! Ah! by Heaven! you ad dress yourself to me well! No, no! actions like these are too rare—they do too much honour to the whole human race, that they should not be published—and that loudly, too—and that a hundred times, rather than once!"

"Madam," said M. de Rochegune to my aunt, "I am indeed mortified. I had ordered myself to be denied to every one. You, only, were to be admitted; and it was my intention to remain in my private study, so that I might not interfere with your visit to the house."

"And I forced my way in!" cried M. Dupré "A secret presentiment told me that it was you, monsieur. I had heard that you were expected, from hour to hour, to set out on your travels; but it was only yesterday that I discovered to whom it is that I owe almost the life of my poor mother—and it was necessary that I should see you, at all hazards."

"Monsieur! monsieur!" said M. de Rochegune, imploringly.

"Oh! monsieur, monsieur! it will not do to perform good actions thus sullenly—and then to wish to hide yourself afterward. Yes, monsieur, I say, sullenly!" cried M. Dupré, in his generous indignation. "But, fortunately, these ladies are here—they shall be the judges. A bankruptcy had ruined me. Until that day, I had always lived in comfort: that blow was terrible,—less for myself, less even for my wife, than for my mother, who was old and blind. Above everything, madam, it was necessary to conceal from her this evil. By dint of industry, my wife and myself contrived for some time to accomplish this; but at length our strength was exhausted—my poor wife fell ill. We should, perhaps, have perished in our despair, when, one day, madam, I received an enclosure of a hundred thousand francs, with a letter, informing me that it was a repayment, on the part of the bankrupt, who had taken four hundred thousand from me. You can comprehend my joy—my happiness! My wife—my mother, were now beyond fear of want! To us, accustomed as we are to work—which we have not, on this account, omitted—this sum is absolute riches. I told every one that I owed this to the remorse of the wretch who had robbed me. Persons who knew the man, doubted the fact—and they were right; Monsieur de Rochegune was the sole performer of this noble action."

"But, once again, monsieur, you are tiring out these ladies," said M. de Rochegune impatiently.

"At least, sir," said Mademoiselle de Maran bitterly, who was swaying herself to and fro in her arm-chair with a spiteful movement—"at least, come to the point of your story."

"Monsieur," cried Gontran, gaily taking M. Dupré by the hand, "we all league ourselves against Monsieur de Rochegune, whatever he says of it.

Although we are in his house, we will not stir a step from it till you have told the whole story."

"To be sure, I will, monsieur," answered M. Dupré. "I see that you are capable of appreciating deeds like this. Restlessly anxious to find out whence came this generous assistance, I examined the letter. I knew not the handwriting—see, now, if Providence did not assist me. One of my friends from the provinces, who is shortly coming up to Paris—Monsieur Eloi Secherin—entrusted me to engage for him a servant from some good family."

"The husband of Ursula?" cried I.

"Does madam, then, know Monsieur Secherin?" said M. Duprê, much astonished.

"Now, for God's sake, go on, my dear sir!" exclaimed Mademoiselle de Maran.

"Yesterday, then," said M. Dupré, "a servant came to wait on me. I asked him for his certificates of character. He showed me several; the last was from Monsieur le Marquis de Rochegune. On opening it, the handwriting struck me; I ran for my letter—no more doubts, monsieur—the handwriting was the same! the same, absolutely—it was impossible to be mistaken. To describe my joy—my emotion, would be impossible. I asked the servant for some information touching his master. 'Ah! sir,' he said to me, 'there could not be a better—a more charitable; he is the very picture of his father, who did so much good!' 'Why, then,' I asked, 'do you quit his service?' 'Alas! monsieur, the Marquis is setting out for a long journey, and keeps only two old servants, who accompany him.' I could no longer entertain a doubt; I told my wife the whole. I left home yesterday, and came hither; Monsieur de Rochegune had gone out. I came back in the evening; he had not returned. At last, this morning, after I had begged in vain to see him, fearing that he might depart, and I could not see him, I forced my way up, despite the porter; and I have had the pleasure of taking my benefactor by the hand. Oh! at first, he would have denied it; but he is too unskilled in falsehood."

"Monsieur!" exclaimed De Rochegune, his embarrassment still increasing.

"Yes, monsieur," replied M. Dupré, "you know not how to lie! I tell you, that you lie miserably! And when I requested you, in order to confound you, to write me exactly the same letter which I had received with the hundred thousand francs, you did not dare, monsieur—you did not dare do it! Answer that, if you can! You see, madam—you see what he has done for me! You see me, too proud to accept it as a gift, but not as a loan; for I reckon on repaying it by my own industry. This is the good and noble action which I will relate everywhere. But I am not the less happy at being able to commit monsieur fairly before witnesses; for, henceforth, he will be unable to deny it!"

"Yes, sir, I shall deny it," answered De Rochegune, "for it concerns me much that the real benefactor be known: however grateful, therefore, your thanks might be to me, I cannot accept them. I have, in this action, only obeyed strictly the last injunctions of my father;" and his voice, as he spoke, was sad and solemn.

"Your father, monsieur!" cried M. Dupré.

"Yes, sir, once more—I have but executed his last wishes!"

"But I had not the honour of being known to him, monsieur. But you had lost him long before you came so generously to my aid."

"A few words will explain, monsieur, what I have told you. My father had, in his youth, placed a small sum in one of those societies founded for the benefit of the last survivor. He had completely forgotten having done so. A short time before his death, he received about three hundred thousand francs, which came from that source. A scruple, all the delicacy of which I appreciate, prevented me from profiting by a sum arising from the successive death of so many persons. That sum was destined by him to good deeds. During his life he so spent a part of it. When I lost him, he charged me to employ the remainder in the same manner. I learned, monsieur, with what pious energy, for two whole years, you struggled against fate; I learned how admirable had been your conduct to your mother: I did, therefore, monsieur, as you perceive, nothing more than obey my father's orders. I had intended this to remain secret, like many other of my father's good deeds. Chance has decided otherwise. I confess to you, that I regret this the less, since it has given me the pleasure of a personal acquaintance with one whose brave devotion had struck me so forcibly."

And with these words he extended his hand cordially to M. Dupré.

I was deliciously agitated, if I may so speak. I remembered with what simple grace M. de Lancry had told me the tale of M. Dupré, at the opera; so that the thought of Gontran was blended agreeably with all the high and noble thoughts which this scene awakened in my heart. I looked at Gontran with emotion, and it seemed to me that he shared with me the admiration I felt, both for the beneficiary and the benefactor.

Mademoiselle de Maran had several times smiled ironically. I recognised her wonted spite, in the portrait she had drawn of M. de Rochegune's father—one of the most remarkable and most justly venerated characters of the day; having rendered himself illustrious by a multitude of actions, full of enlightened philanthropy, and by the great and noble efforts of his intellect.

"Monsieur," said Gontran, with perfect amiability, "I am happy that chance has permitted me to see, what I already knew by the world's report—that in certain privileged families, and yours is of the number, the noblest qualities are hereditary;" and then turning to Dupré, "It is about two months ago, that I had the honour to relate to these ladies, at the opera, your noble conduct, with all that enthusiasm to which it gave birth. I hardly then hoped that I should have the pleasure to express to yourself that admiration which you so well deserve."

"It was at the 'Siege of Corinth,' was it not, monsieur?" replied Dupré, with much simplicity, "one night when *Mademoiselle la Duchesse de Berry* was present at the performance, was it not? It must have been so. It was the first time that my wife and I had been to the opera for two years: we considered it quite a treat."

"We remarked, monsieur," said Mademoiselle de Maran, "the *berret* of Madame Dupré, which became her admirably; she looked as pretty as an angel, and had not the least appearance of one who worked for her bread."

"Perhaps you think, madam, that my wife was dressed above her station," said M. Dupré, with a melancholy pride. "At that time, madam, I looked upon this money as a restitution of my own. Now that I know it is a loan, I shall deprive myself of all superfluities."

Gontran, annoyed as much as I was by the spiteful remark of Mademoiselle de Maran, observed to M. de Rochegune, as if to turn the conversation—

"But I had the pleasure of seeing you also at the opera, M. de Rochegune, and had no idea that you were the mysterious benefactor whose good deeds I was relating to the ladies."

"Yes, I believe I was at the opera that night," said M. de Rochegune, with an air of embarrassment. I raised my eyes by chance to his, and as I met them, he turned away with a deep blush.

"Monsieur," said Mademoiselle de Maran, adopting a good-humoured manner which I knew to be the forerunner of some malicious speech, "nothing that we have seen or heard can astonish us. Monsieur your father had accustomed the world to admiration of his great deeds."

"Madam—" answered M. de Rochegune, bowing with a species of cold and proud impatience, whether it was that he disliked Mademoiselle de Maran, or that his modesty was annoyed by the prolongation of the scene.

"Pardon me, monsieur; he was an admirable man," said Mademoiselle de Maran. "I was just now telling my niece, that nothing could be more touching than his visits to the prisons, and his kindness to the poor in his hospital. He resembled a St. Vincent de Paule, or something near it."

"He was simply a good man—he never pretended to anything more, madam," said M. de Rochegune, in a firm and severe tone, which showed that he was not duped by the ironical praises of Mademoiselle de Maran.

I was delighted, however, to perceive by the dissatisfied expression of Gontran, that he was as much annoyed as I to hear my aunt talk thus. But the character of Mademoiselle de Maran was too proud ever to yield; she always, as they say vulgarly, determined to have the last word.

Taking the arm then of M. de Lancry, she said to M. de Rochegune,

"Adieu, monsieur! It is the truth, whatever you may say of it. No simply good man could ever have performed the wondrous action of the *tontine*.*

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* *Tontine* is the name by which such societies as that whence M. de Rochegune derived the sum employed in charity are called.

Yes, monsieur, that scruple about the *tontine* would have, in itself, been enough to make a whole family illustrious. A hundred thousand crowns in charity!—but in old times, after all, it would have been said that none but great misers allowed themselves to make that kind of *amende honorable.*"

"Pardon me, monsieur," said Gontran, "these ladies have to pay some visits: I will come at some other time to see the house, if you will permit me."

"It is quite at your service, monsieur," said M. de Rochegune, bowing with a cold air, and scarcely caring to repress his indignation at the last words of my aunt.

When we were again in the carriage, I could not refrain from saying,

"Oh, madam, you have been very cruel!"

"How, cruel?" she exclaimed, bursting into a fit of laughter. "Let me alone! do you think I can be taken in by such comedies?"

"What comedies?"

"Do you ask what comedies? Why, all this had been settled on, arranged beforehand! We were expected. It is evident that M. Dupré had been desired to come and hold himself ready to utter his shrieks of gratitude. And, in fact, he began to cry like a magpie when he knew that we were near the door. That old blockhead of a steward of course ran away to tell them, under the pretext of seeking the key of the library."

"Ah, madam, what an idea!" cried Gontran; "and to what possible end?"

"Oh, my poor fellow! it is but too plain. If M. de Rochegune overcharges you twenty or thirty thousand francs, you will not dare bargain with a man capable of such noble actions, without considering, that to live in an hotel which has witnessed deeds so noble, brings happiness in itself—that pays! I would bet, that old Richegune played off many such schemes to gain himself a reputation as a philanthropist, in order to be able, under that plea, to dabble in all sorts of abominable usuries. They say he lent money at exorbitant interest for short periods; I believe it, for my part, for he died worth millions. The proof of what I say is, that people do not make charities of a hundred thousand crowns who have clear consciences. *They are fat sinners who give fat dinners to the poor,* as the acting curate of my parish of Glatigny, who was no fool, used to say. The deuce! a hundred thousand crowns in charities! that is a sop for the devil, as good people say; or, if you like it better, it is the interest of a capital of all sorts of villanies."

"But, madam," said Gontran impatiently, "you will at least admit that this really could not have been laid out better, wherever it may have come from."

"Certainly, certainly! that little Dupré is an exceedingly pretty little creature, upon my word! with her rose-coloured bonnet. M. de Rochegune evidently thought so, and the blockhead of a husband seems to thank him!"

"Ah, madam, how very shocking!" exclaimed Gontran. "Besides, M. de Rochegune sets out in a few days."

"Well, what of that? he sets out, does he?—that only goes to prove that he is tired of the little citizen," said Mademoiselle de Maran, laughing.

"Madam, madam!" said M. de Lancry, casting a glance at me, as if to remind my aunt of the impropriety of her words.

I cannot describe to you, my friend, my sensations at hearing Mademoiselle de Maran thus spitefully slight, with her envious tongue, all that I most admired. Never before had her dread—her hatred—of everything good, whether physical or moral, been so odiously made manifest.

At this new proof of her pitiless malignity, I resumed the consideration of myself and my own situation. My distrust of my aunt became at every moment stronger, while, at the same time, my blind confidence in Gontran was not diminished.

But I could not help remembering what Madame de Richeville had said to me—"Distrust this marriage, your aunt promotes it—it must be fatal."

I also recollected, that the duchess had not deceived me in the qualities which she attributed to M. de Rochegune, whom M. de Mortagne wished me to marry.

I confess to you, my friend, that for a moment I was shaken by the apparent weight of these considerations. My heart trembled, if I so may speak, at finding that my head could not answer them. Instinctively I cast my eyes on Gontran, and the sight of his countenance, so mild, so noble, and so sincere, reassured me.

It is not Mademoiselle de Maran, it is my own heart which is making this marriage; and, moreover, because M. de Rochegune has high qualities, is this a cause why Gontran has them not? Was it not he who first told me this touching story of a noble action as nobly recompensed? Did he not, but this moment, share my emotions?

These thoughts soon banished the painful ideas which my aunt's spiteful speeches had occasioned.

When we got out of the carriage, one of Mademoiselle de Maran's people told her that "Mademoiselle Ursula—that is to say," he added, correcting himself, "Madame de Secherin, was waiting in the drawing-room with her husband."

My cousin had arrived—forgetting my aunt, Gontran, everything, I ran up the staircase rapidly.

It was true—there were Ursula and her husband.

CHAPTER XXI.

MONSIEUR AND MADAME DE SECHERIN.

"URSULA!"

"Matilda!"

We embraced one another passionately. I expected to find my poor cousin dreadfully changed: what then was my astonishment at seeing her fresher and prettier than ever, although her features were always melancholy, her expression always sad!

She presented M. Eloi Secherin to me. He was a young man of middle size, very fair, with rather regular features, a high colour, and a joyous, frank expression.

At first sight, he seemed to me to be one of those men, the vulgarity of whose appearance and language is compensated by the freshness and good-humour of their manners. Nevertheless, I could not conceive how my cousin, in accordance with our notions as young ladies, could have contented herself with such a marriage. When I saw M. Secherin, the sacrifice of which Ursula had spoken to me appeared greater than I had thought it. I pitied her deeply for having been obliged to bow to the imperious will of her father. As I embraced Ursula, I pressed her hand; she understood me, and returned the pressure, turning her eyes toward heaven.

Mademoiselle de Maran entered the room with M. de Lancry. Ursula cast a glance at me, which cut me to the heart; she was comparing her husband with Gontran.

My cousin presented her husband to Mademoiselle de Maran. I fully expected that she would have given free scope to her ironical disposition; but, to my great surprise, she played the *good woman,* and said to M. Secherin, with great affability, as if to set him at his ease—

"Well, monsieur, you intend, then, to render our Ursula the happiest of women! You will make her forget all of us, who love her so dearly. Do you know, that I shall become very jealous of you, to say the least, Monsieur Secherin? Yes, indeed I shall—and first of all, I must tell you one thing: we have the habit here of speaking quite frankly—we live in a united family circle—in half-an-hour you will know us as if we had passed our lives together. As for me, I am a good old woman, constantly repeating the same thing—how much I adore these two children, Ursula and Matilda. Thus, you must understand that when it concerns them, I am never neutral: thus, I love all those who love them. But that out of the question, I scold, I sulk, I am capricious, I talk, because these are the privileges of old age. And yet—notwithstanding all this, Monsieur Secherin, I know not how it is, but somehow or other, people end by liking me but little."

M. Secherin was completely duped by this pretended good-nature. I observed the confidence with which my aunt's words inspired him, gradually growing upon his frank and cordial face, and his embarrassment and restraint melting away; and, as she ceased speaking, he cried out joyously,

"Upon my word, madam, I do not think they ought to like you but little; for my part, I think they ought to like you very much; and, since we are to speak frankly, I must confess to you that I was devilishly afraid of you. But now your reception has quite set me at my ease."

"How! you were afraid of me, my dear Monsieur Secherin? and pray why, if you please?'

In vain Ursula made sign after sign to her husband; he would not perceive them.

"Certainly, madam, I was afraid of you," replied M. Secherin, becoming yet more confident; "and I had good reason why."

"Good heavens! Monsieur Secherin—but—"

"Unquestionably, madam. My father-in-law, M. le Baron d'Orbeval, was constantly trumpeting it into my ears—'Be on your guard, my son-in-law—Mademoiselle de Maran is a very fine lady! If you should have the misfortune to displease her, you will be ruined for ever. For she has twenty times the wit that you have, and she knows how to use her wit, I promise you!' Well now, madam, do you know how I shall answer my father-in-law?—for it does not take me very long, I assure you, to measure my goods."

Ursula blushed to the very brows, when she heard this vulgar expression. Gontran concealed his mirth; but Mademoiselle de Maran said, with an expression of incredible kindness,

"Monsieur Secherin, pardon me; we promised each other to be frank; did we not?"

"Yes, madam."

"Very well! People are not in the habit of saying, even about an old woman, such as I—*to measure my goods.* Oh! I will pass over nothing, I promise you—I am just such a woman; besides, we agreed to be frank."

"See, madam," exclaimed M. Secherin, with an expression of gratitude really touching, "what you are doing now is generous and good; do you see! I thank you for it with all my heart! Other ladies would have quizzed me; you have the goodness to correct me. Yet, what would you have?—I am but a provincial, little suited to the fine manners of the capital."

"Paris! Monsieur Secherin! Paris! people do not call it the capital," interrupted Mademoiselle de Maran, with an air of perfect gravity.

"Is it possible, madam? Well, that is strange; our *Procureur du Roi*, and our sub-prefect, always call it *the capital.*"

"That may be so; it is so called in law-matters, and in geography," continued Mademoiselle de Maran; "but this cannot be said otherwise. You see I am implacable, my poor Monsieur Secherin."

"Go on, madam—go on, I pray you. I never forget what has been clearly told me once. Well, now, madam, if I had to describe your portrait to my father-in-law, I should say, doubtless,—Mademoiselle de Maran is a great lady, according to her rank and station; but, in reality, she is a good little lady—frank and even as a fine morning—who carries her heart in her hand, and has, perhaps, even more kind-heartedness than wit. Well, I do not mistake your character much, do I?"

"Oh! in truth, my dear Monsieur Secherin, Lavater was nothing at all, in comparison with you; you are a Nostradamus, a Cagliostro for foresight and prediction. Hold—I am so well contented with your portrait, that I will not find fault with your words."

"Oh yes! madam—oh yes! find fault with them, or I shall be vexed; I give you notice."

"Well, then—no, Monsieur Secherin, I must beg you to excuse me."

"No, madam! I tell you that I shall be angry if you will not take me up."

"Well, since you insist upon it absolutely, in order to preserve harmony between us, I would observe to you, that *even as a fine morning*, and *carries her heart in her hand*, are rather vulgar phrases."

"Well, well, I will not say so any more; but, heavens! madam, how good you are! In fact, I assure you, there is no malice in my composition. You guessed that immediately."

"Certainly; I guessed your character at once, my good Monsieur Secherin. You appear to me the very best of men; and sure I am, that there is not a particle of gall in your nature."

"Gall in me! no more than there is in a pigeon. What I want, I well know it, is education; and yet, what would you have? I have always been brought up in the provinces. My father was a little shopkeeper; he began his fortunes by buying up the property of the 'émigrés.'"

"With such a beginning as that, he could not fail to prosper," said Mademoiselle de Maran. "Certainly, the property of the 'émigrés, at least, brought good luck to monsieur your father."

"That is exactly what did happen, madam."

"I can believe it perfectly, Monsieur Secherin."

"As for my mother," continued the unhappy victim of my aunt's [illegible] mockery; "as for my mother, she is one of the best of women; but she has always persisted in keeping her little round cap, and her short petticoat, after the old fashion. She is a good housekeeper, in every sense of the word. You see, then, that I have not been brought up like a duke, or a peer of the realm. I went through my studies, such as they were, at the College of Tours. At the death of my father, I undertook the management of his fortunes, and in his old deal bureau I found a schedule of sixty-three thousand seven hundred livres yearly income, in lands and personal property, and that clear of taxes; without taking into account the stock of the manufactories, which employ five hundred labourers, and are yet unable to supply the demand for my goods. That is what I am, in one word, madam."

"But, truly, yours is a magnificent position," replied Mademoiselle de Maran. "It is very plain, worthy people always prosper; and I am sure that it was the property of the 'émigrés,' of whom we spoke just now, that gave rise to the prosperity of monsieur your father."

"Madam," said Ursula, who was in agony, "I fear these details—"

"Be quiet, Ursula: they interest me beyond measure."

"Doubtless, my dear little beauty, my little business matters must naturally interest our kind relative."

"Monsieur Secherin, ever true to my system of frankness, I must remark to you, that *my dear little beauty* should be reserved for the sweetest and most secret intimacy. You profane the mysterious charm of those adorable expressions, by using them thus prodigally."

"And yet, madam, my father always called my mother, *dear little beauty;* and my mother, in turn, used to call him *little papa*, or *great wolf*."

"But observe, my dear Monsieur Secherin, it is not that I object to such tender appellations as *dear little beauty*, *little papa*, or even *great wolf*, taken in themselves; on the contrary, I trust that Ursula, piously faithful to the touching traditional usages of your family, lavishes on you, in secret, those delicious names."

"What! then you have told, madam, that you called me your great wolf, have you?" said M. de Secherin, turning suddenly to Ursula, and clapping his hands with astonishment.

"Really, Ursula, and do you actually call Monsieur Secherin your great wolf, already?" cried my aunt.

"Yes, madam, she does," replied M. Secherin, proudly; "and she does so without mittens, too."

"Ah! madam, can you believe it?" said Ursula, tears of vexation and embarrassment coming into her eyes.

"How?" said M. Secherin—"How? do you forget, that the day but one after our marriage—when I showed you the schedule of my fortune, and said, embracing you as I spoke, 'All this is yours and your great wolf's?' and how you replied, embracing me in your turn, 'Yes; it is all mine and my great wolf's?' Pray remember, it was in the little green-room, which I use for a study."

It would be impossible to paint the grief and dismay of Ursula, as she heard these words. I was grieved to the heart for her. Gontran smiled in spite of himself. Mademoiselle de Maran was in a state of triumph; but she did not choose to prolong the scene too much, and replied instantly—

"Hold your tongue! for shame! Monsieur Secherin, you indiscreet wretch! Do people talk about such things as these? Such choice little bits of happiness should be kept religiously to ourselves. These are little coquettish, and mysteriously gallant happinesses, which must not be talked about. Ursula might have called you her great wolf a thousand, and ten thousand times—and she would have killed herself, rather than confess; and she would have done rightly. I tell you, you are an indiscreet wretch! Ah! you men! you men! we can never let you read in our hearts our most sacred preferences—we can never prove our attachment to you, by the most endearing titles, but you must go directly and boast of them aloud."

"Well, that is true, madam," said M. Secherin. "I was wrong, and you are right—in the right always. Another lesson, that I have learned already. I will keep my *little beauty*, and *great wolf*, to ourselves, my wife."

"You will do well to do so. But now tell me about the properties of the 'émigrés,' which monsieur your father bought up, when he was a small shopkeeper. You cannot think how much that interests me. Were these properties considerable?"

"Yes; they were, madam. Many of them belonged to the family of

Rochegune, before the Revolution; but, on the Restoration, my father sold them back to the old marquis."

At this name, which was so singularly, and so constantly, recurring during that day, my aunt frowned heavily.

"Has Monsieur de Rochegune still many rights in your province, monsieur?" asked Gontran.

"Certainly, sir—he has all the rights of a father, as he has all the qualities of one. The almshouse for old men, founded by the late marquis, is two leagues from my house. Ah! madam," said M. Secherin, turning to my aunt, "how much good the late marquis did in the province!—and that, too, with so little pride. In one word, fancy, madam, that every Sunday, while he was at the *Chateau de Rochegune*, he went to mass at the almshouse for these old men; that he dined with them; went with them to vespers; supped with them, slept in their dormitory—always did this once every week—and this is not all, for he followed the coffin of the poor who died, to the grave-yard. This is what may be called doing good with genuine goodness of heart—may it not, madam?"

"Yes, doubtless," answered Mademoiselle de Maran ironically; "to go and eat out of the same trencher with those old vagabonds—there is something quite enlivening in the mere idea of it!"

"You are very right, madam," answered M. Secherin, simply. "It cheered the very hearts of those poor people. But this is nothing yet to what he did, madam!"

"Heavens! is there anything more than this fellow-trenchering?"

"Yes, madam. As I was one of the largest manufacturers of the province, M. le Marquis requested me to order little jobs for these poor old creatures: they did them—but God knows how! they were good for nothing. The late M. le Marquis paid the prime cost of the material which was lost; and not only that—he insisted on reimbursing me the small sum which I paid them, poor people! nominally for the price of their labour, so that they might believe they earned by their industry the presents which they procured thus."

"This was indeed a surpassing delicacy," cried Mademoiselle de Maran, "and excellently well judged too! for only think, if these messieurs vagabonds had discovered that M. de Rochegune took the liberty of giving them alms out-and-out, they might have taken it into their heads to revolt, to browbeat this impertinent marquis finely, and, profiting by the occasion of his sleeping some night in their dormitory, to—"

The bitterness with which Mademoiselle Maran ridiculed an action of delicacy, perhaps a little overdone, but which, to say the least, showed the most exquisite kindness of heart, proved how much she was vexed at finding her calumnies so brilliantly confuted. Gontran seemed to share my emotion. Ursula, with her eyes downcast, appeared to be in a fit of deep and sorrowful meditation.

M. de Lancry said to M. Secherin, "I, also, think the conduct of M. Rochegune admirable, monsieur; and is the almshouse still kept up?"

"It is, monsieur, and M. le Marquis does now, in all respects, as his father did before him. When he returned from travelling, he passed six months in the château, and he regularly went, once a week, to dine and sleep at the almshouse, as his father did."

"And he deserves, certainly, *as well as his father did* for it!" said Mademoiselle de Maran. "Does he put on the same cap and cassocks too, that the poor people do, on these grand days?"

"No, madam, he remains dressed just as usual. Oh! he does this as he does everything—quite simply, and without any ostentation. He derives that from his father. It is like his courage—he is as brave as a lion. Look here: seven or eight years ago—he was then only twenty—he and a curious man, M. le Comte de Mortagne, who was the intimate friend of his father, performed a deed which would have made the boldest shrink from undertaking it."

When she heard the name of M. de Mortagne, the ill-temper of my aunt increased.

"Did you then know M. de Mortagne?" I cried eagerly to M. Secherin.

"Yes, mademoiselle; he was an original who had been to the world's end—an old trooper of the Grand Army, with a beard like a sapper's. He used often to come to see us at the manufactory. My poor father loved him greatly.—But to come to the point of my story. One day he and young Monsieur de Rochegune were hunting the hare on horseback with grey-hounds; they had, therefore, no guns with them, but were merely armed with whips. The hare broke covert from the forest of Rochegune, and took the plain. They found in the open country a poor shepherd covered with blood, and half-dead.

"Well, well! I see what is coming," said Mademoiselle de Maran impatiently; some dog, or some dead wolf, had bitten the sheep, and the shepherd, and these two paladins put it to death! Well, that was glorious, magnificent! We will say no more about it."

"No, madam, it was——"

"Very well, very well, my dear Monsieur Secherin, spare us these histories; I have no doubt they possess a sort of terrible beauty, and the recollection of them will give me the nightmare to-night. Besides, I see in Ursula's eyes that she is dying to go and have a chat with Matilda."

I rose, took my cousin by the hand, and led her to my room, leaving Monsieur Secherin with my aunt and Gontran.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE CONFESSION.

You can understand, my friend, what must have been the deep and cruel humiliation of Ursula. She had not only endured the vulgarity of her husband, but also the disclosure of the absurdly familiar expressions which he had used to her within a few days of their marriage.

Mademoiselle de Maran had been gratified even beyond her hopes. Her false good-nature, by throwing the husband of Ursula off his guard, had shown him in a light almost grotesque; chance had accomplished the rest.

I think that I may now remark to you, my friend, without too much anticipating the thread of events, that from my childhood Mademoiselle de Maran had been actuated but by one thought—to excite the jealousy and envy of Ursula against me; she wished to make, sooner or later, an implacable enemy, *her* whom I loved with the tenderest affection.

When I was yet a child, she had rated my intelligence, my talents, above those of Ursula. When a young lady, it was my beauty and my fortune that were entirely to eclipse my cousin; and, to conclude, she made it a point indirectly to show off the distinction, the elegance, the position, and the high birth of Gontran, whom I was about to marry, by drawing out, with a malice almost devilish, the undue openheartedness of Monsieur Secherin, Ursula's husband.

Alas! my friend, I believe, that had it not been for the constant efforts of my aunt to possess her of the idea, my cousin would not so often and so bitterly have compared her position with mine; she could not have envied me my few advantages, and we should have lived without rivalship, without jealousy. I shall always believe that the heart of Ursula was naturally good and generous; the insinuations of my aunt were the causes of all the ill she did me afterwards.

I went up to my room with Ursula. I had the most entire, the kindest confidence in her sincerity. I saw in her a victim. I remembered the doleful, lamentable letter which she had written me; yet, at the same time, I strove in vain to explain to myself the singular familiarities of the expressions which she had addressed to her husband, two or three days after that marriage, so dreadful to her apprehensions, that it had led her even to contemplate the possibility of suicide.

If I had for one moment suspected Ursula of dissimulation, if I had dreamed of her contracting that marriage—not, indeed, with pleasure, but on a calculation—I should have understood the strange contradiction between the words and the letter of my cousin; but, I repeat it, I had deep trust in her, and, confident, I awaited her explanation of the mystery.

When she entered my room, Ursula fell into an arm-chair, and hid her face in her hands, without uttering a word.

"Ursula, my friend, my sister!" I exclaimed, casting myself at her knees, and taking her hands in mine.

"Leave me—leave me!" she said, struggling to disengage herself, and smiling through her tears; "wherefore these words of tenderness? You do not, you *cannot* feel them."

"Oh! Ursula, this is cruel!—what have I done, what have I said to you? Wherefore receive me thus? Oh, my God! after so long an absence, too."

"I do not accuse your heart, Matilda, it is generous and good; but it is because it is generous, that it must hate that which is all falsehood and hypocrisy. So, leave me, leave me! think not that you are obliged to seem to love me."

"What, Ursûla! what say you?"

"Do I not know that you despise me?" cried the unhappy woman, melting into tears, and then rising and hurrying to the window, to wipe them from her eyes. I was stupified; not understanding what Ursula said to me, I ran up to her.

"But, in the name of Heaven! explain yourself. What do you mean to say? why do you think I should despise you?"

"Why! Matilda, can you ask me now? It is but a fortnight since that I wrote you a deploring letter, a letter which described to you the agonies of my heart. You, moved by my despair, pitied your friend. You wept over her sacrifices, over the death of her young illusions; and now you have heard that this woman—who looked forward to death alone as an escape from her hapless destiny—that this very woman, three days after this detested marriage, lavishes on her husband names the most ridiculously familiar. Again, Matilda, I tell you that you do despise or pity me. But no! I will not have pity; I will have disdain, rather; I will have hatred, rather; I will have indifference, rather; but pity, never! never!"

And putting her handkerchief to her mouth, Ursula stifled the sobs which she could not overcome.

"But you are mad, Ursula; you think not what you say. Remember, then, my letter, and do you not feel my tears trickling down your cheeks?" said I, embracing her. "Do I not see, alas! that you are very wretched? and what does a falsehood of your husband signify, after all, to me?"

"A falsehood! no! it was not a falsehood, Matilda. No! those absurdly familiar words—I *did* use them—do you hear? I *did* use them."

"You did *use* them, Ursula?"

"Yes! yes! so leave me! You see plainly I am the most hypocritical, the most false of creatures. I feign despair to win pity for myself, when I am in truth delighted with this marriage; my husband is so rich. Oh, shame! oh, infamy!"

And Ursula pressed both her hands forcibly against her forehead.

"No! there is no shame," cried I; "no infamy! Some mystery there is, which I do not understand, but neither infamy nor shame. But what signify, after all, a few words more or less? You are in grief, you weep; well, I will be in grief too—I will weep with you. Behold my tears, my sister! see how my heart beats! Tell me, now, only tell me, do you call this contempt or pity?"

"No, no! Matilda, I believe you. Pardon, oh pardon me! for having doubted for one instant your heart's truth. But it was because I have—because I must necessarily have so many prejudices to overcome in your mind!"

"Not one!" I exclaimed.

"Then hear me, my sister, my sweet sister. Your tears, your afflictions, have torn from me my secret. This moment I would tell you nothing—I wished never more to see you; for to live with you, under the suspicion of hypocrisy, indeed seemed to me impossible."

"Poor Ursula! go on: do I not deserve your confidence?"

"Yes! oh yes—you alone—oh, Heaven! Now listen: this marriage caused me a despair so deep, that, until the last moment, I thought that some unlooked-for event would occur. Yes! I was like one of those criminals, who know that they must die, that there is no pardon for them, and who yet cannot hinder themselves from expecting this hopeless, this impossible pardon. It was the last instinctive hope of happiness which still struggled in my soul!"

"Ursula, Ursula, what you tell me is frightful. Oh, my God! how you must have suffered!"

"I obeyed my father! I was anxious to render it impossible for you to complete the generous sacrifice you contemplated. The marriage took place—my lot once irrevocably fixed, I had but one of two alternatives—death, or—"

"Ursula, Ursula, you shall not talk thus! you terrify me!"

"Death or a miserable life. One moment I remained stunned, under the weight of my frightful prospects. And yet, before despairing altogether, I asked myself, what it was that caused my repugnance to my husband? I answered myself, that it was the vulgarity of his manners, his want of education—for his heart, I think, is good."

"Oh, doubtless, Ursula! believe it! believe it! It is generous, it is good. Did you not see, with what sympathy he spoke of the charities of M. de Rochegune? Heaven! his language, his manners, will soon adapt themselves to those of the world."

"Well, then," said I to myself, "this common language shocks me; those familiarities, almost rough, are repugnant to me. My life, henceforth, must be spent in the society of this man; I must renounce for ever all the dreams of girlhood; henceforth I must lead another life. Courage! all is accomplished, all"—and tears drowned the voice of Ursula. "It is the delicacy," she began again, "the necessary delicacy of my habits, of my tastes, that renders me unhappy. Well; since I cannot raise my husband to my own standard, I will lower myself to his. Yes, this language, which is so revolting to me, I will speak it! these manners, which make me shudder with disgust, I will copy them! Matilda, Matilda, I did so; I flattered this man, as he would be flattered. I pretended to love him, as he would be loved! I repeated his expressions, coarsely familiar as they were—I repeated them, I say; but it was with shame and deep humiliation! Oh, my sister! oh, my sister! you will never know—never—never—what I suffered during that trial, eight days long, which I imposed upon myself. You will never know how frightful is that self-profanation, that lie of the lips, from which the heart starts back in horror! Oh! how many tears, devoured in secret, while I was playing out that sad and bitter play! But see—I can no more—the agony is too great. I can no more! oh, rather than continue thus to degrade myself, to lie thus—death—death a thousand times!"

The accents of Ursula were so agonising, so despairing—her air was so wild, her features so disordered, that I was frightened.

Then I understood her conduct—then I was struck by the courage which she must have possessed to make such a trial.

"Reassure yourself," I answered her; "my sister, only hear my advice. You deceive yourself, I think, when you esteem it necessary to descend to the level of your husband. His heart is generous—he idolises you. Try, on the contrary, to raise him to your standard. Did you not see, just now, with what eagerness he gathered up the observations of Mademoiselle de Maran? Judge, then, what efficacy yours would have! Think of this, Ursula; oh, my sister, think of this! Doubtless, I would have chosen for you a different union; but, in a word, this is now consummated. Cast not from you the only chance of happiness!"

"Happiness! Matilda, happiness for me! Oh! never!"

"Yes, yes! happiness. Your husband is good, frank, and loyal. He is rich, he loves you. His appearance, it is true, is not very striking; his manners, his language, want a finish. What of that? is that irreparable? Heavens! such things are quickly learned—the example is everything! and you will be a charming example from which to study. And then, would you desire us to aid you? Yes! to render this task of education the easier to you," I continued, smiling, "should you wish Gontran and myself to go and pass some time with you? If you do not intend yet to take a house in Paris, come and stay with us. We have now got a house large enough to offer you a suite of rooms. Well, now, what say you to my project?"

"I say, that you are ever the very best of friends—the very tenderest of sisters!" answered Ursula, clasping me in her arms affectionately. "I say, that when you are by, I forget my sorrows, and that you have the gift of kindling a hope in me again. But, alas! Matilda, it will be hard for me so to delude myself!"

"I do not ask you to delude yourself—I only tell you to believe in realities. You shall see your husband one year hence! see, I say how his love for you will have transformed him!"

"But only see, how selfish grief has made me!" exclaimed Ursula. "I have never even spoken to you of your happiness. Oh! *you* must be very happy!"

"Oh yes! especially now that you are to share my happiness. Indeed, Ursula, if I knew that you were free from grief, I can dream of no bliss that would equal mine. Gontran is so kind, so devoted; he has a heart so impassioned, a character so noble—and then he understands me so well! Oh, I feel it here—here, in the security of my heart—that it will be a life-long happiness. He inspires me with an unalterable confidence—death only could disturb it! And yet—no, no! Who can love as I do! who can be as happy as I am—and not die first! No! nothing in the world can rob me of this conviction, that I am the happiest of women, and that this happiness will last as long as I—or, I should say, as long as Gontran lives to bless me!"

And even now, my friend, when those presentiments of my soul have been so cruelly deceived, I recollect that my trust in a happy future was blindly absolute.

Eight days after the arrival of Ursula, all our family was to be assembled to witness the signing of my marriage contract with M. de Lancry.

My aunt had prevailed on the mayor of our *arrondissement* to marry us on the very evening of the ceremony, in order to shield us from the curiosity of the public.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE LETTER.

On the morning appointed for the signing of the contract, I was awakened, as usual, by Blondeau, bringing me the basket of jasmine and heliotrope which, for six weeks, Gontran had sent me every morning.

I have always attached great importance to what are called small things—delicate, slight attentions, when they are endearing from the continual occupation of the thoughts. Occasions on which affection can be shown by any great and brilliant action are so rare, that it is wiser to employ—if it is permissible to use such a term—the small coins of love.

Those persons who reserve themselves for great occasions seem to say to you—*Drown yourself, cast yourself into the midst of flames*, and then you shall know what my love is worth.

Predestinarian, as I was, in matters of the heart, this basket of flowers sent every morning had a deep meaning to my mind. The memory of Gontran's first declaration was attached, as it were, to it; and I thought, with unspeakable pleasure, that henceforth every day would commence with a thought of his approaching presence, in the midst of the flowers I adored.

Very early in the morning, I went to church with Madame de Blondeau; for as I felt the moment drawing nearer in which I should belong to Gontran, I experienced, more than ever, the irrepressible desire of praying—of blessing God—and of submitting my future happiness to the protection of Heaven and of my sainted mother. I experienced a sort of joy, at the same time, serene, confident, and serious. Often during that day my eyes were moistened, I knew not wherefore, with sweet tears. They were the consequence of vague feelings of tenderness, involuntary, and continually ending in bursts of ineffable and religious gratitude.

At about four o'clock in the afternoon, Mademoiselle de Maran sent for me to her chamber, which I had not entered for a long time. I cannot tell you, my friend, what I experienced, when I found myself again in that room which recalled to me so vividly the sufferings of my childhood. Nothing was changed therein—there was the same crucifix, the same large stained glass windows, the writing-desk of red lacquered work, the green *chiffonnieres* upon the mantelpiece, and the stuffed ancestors of Felix—each under its glass case—who, it seemed probable, would soon join them.

Mademoiselle de Maran was sitting at her writing-desk. I saw upon the leaf of it a little case, a portfolio, a sealed parcel, and a medallion of my aunt, which she was looking at so attentively that she did not perceive my entrance. Her features, always so scornful, wore an expression of severe sadness which I had never seen before; her thin lips were contracted by that smile of implacable irony which rendered her so formidable; but she now seemed careworn and downcast.

I hesitated to address her, but in leaning upon the chimney-piece I moved a candlestick; Mademoiselle de Maran turned her head quickly, and cried,

"Who is there?"

She saw me—let fall the medallion which she held in her hand, and continued for some minutes in deep thought.

"We are about to part, Matilda," she said, with an accent of softness, which rendered me dumb with surprise "Your early youth has not been happy—has it? You will always look back with bitterness on the time you have spent with me."

"Madam?——"

"It must be so—I know it." She went on in a low voice, as if she were talking to herself—"You have often found me harsh and peevish to you. I have never been to you what I should have been. No, I well know it. It is certainly on this account, that I feel a sort of grief at losing you. Your young and pretty face cheered this old house a little. I am very old, and as one grows old it is very sad to remain all alone, to wait for their last hour with a little dog only for a companion; and then to die alone—unpitied—unregretted!"

After a few moments of gloomy silence, she went on, still speaking very softly—"Be generous, Matilda. Do not leave my house with any unkind feeling toward me. That would render my solitude more grievous."

Mademoiselle de Maran was unquestionably sincere, as she spoke thus to me. The most evil-minded are not exempt from occasional returns of remorse. Besides, the expression of her features, and her voice itself, betrayed her agitation—and then, she had no motive for playing this farce before me.

I was, indeed, much affected by this mark of sensibility—the only one, indeed, that my aunt had ever shown me. I had been rather delighted than surprised, by her consent to my marriage with Gontran. I knew that, in the strict letter of the law, I could have dispensed with her permission; and, without any very great vanity, I felt that my aunt must be satisfied with the power of giving my hand to the nephew of one of her most intimate friends. But, on this occasion, the affectionate regrets of Mademoiselle de Maran really touched me sensibly.

I took her hand, raised it to my lips, and kissed it, for once, with sincere veneration. She was stooping over me, so that I only saw her forehead. Suddenly she raised herself quickly, and opened her arms to me. To my great surprise, two tears, the only tears which I ever saw shed by Mademoiselle de Maran, bedewed her eyelids. I flung myself on my knees before her. She leaned her arms lightly on my shoulders, and said, looking at me affectionately,

"You have never complained—yet you have never felt the sweetness of a mother's kiss. Up to this moment, I have either cruelly tormented you, or praised you with exaggeration no less cruel. I have done evil. I am grieved for it. What would you that I should say more? I shall regret it to the end of my days, which, alas! is not very far off. Happily, your good disposition has risen above all. This is one reproach spared to me—there will remain enough without it. Yes! my dear little girl, I am so grieved, that, if there were yet time, I should —— But no—no—and yet ——"

Without finishing her sentence, my aunt stooped her head again, as if a new strife had begun within her, between her wish to speak and some other secret influence.

In spite of myself, I was afraid—as if my future lot, in some sort, depended on the words which she hesitated to speak out. She, wishing, perhaps, to strengthen herself in her good resolution, by drawing from me more words of tenderness, said,

"I am less odious to you now than I was formerly—is it not so?"

"Within a moment or two, aunt, I love you—all is forgotten;" and I pressed her hands affectionately in my own.

"It does me good to hear that; and if I were to do you a great service, which would, perhaps, insure the happiness of all your life—would you love me dearly? would you often say to me, with your sweet, soft voice, 'I love you dearly?' You look at me with wide eyes of astonishment. But answer me. I have always been feared, or detested, except by your father—my excellent, kind brother. Ah! he loved me! indeed, loved me! But to him, also, I was always kind and devoted. Yes, I loved him so well, that I thought myself justified in hating all the world besides; and then, I suppose, every one has within himself a less or greater share of affection. As for me, I have very little; and what I have, was all concentrated in your father. I know not why it is, that, at this hour, your voice, your manner touch me; awaken in me, if not affection, at least, pity! Repeat to me, then, that you will love me well—that you will love, with all your heart and soul, the friend who saves you from the precipice down which you are on the very verge of plunging? Answer me—answer me: will you devote your life to that friend?"

Mademoiselle de Maran spoke the last words with a degree of nervous energy that proved the violence of the internal strife which was distracting her. Without understanding a word that my aunt said, I threw myself into her arms, all terrified, crying, "Have pity on me! I know not what calamity threatens me! But, if there be one, oh! speak, speak! You are my father's sister—I am alone, alone! I have but you in the wide world! Who will enlighten me, if it be not you? Oh! speak—for mercy, speak! A calamity, you say—but what? Gontran loves me—I love him as much as I can love! I have in Ursula the most affectionate of friends. How, then, can I go forth into the world under more happy auspices? You, too, at this same moment, speak to me tenderly. A few brief words from you have effaced for ever all the sad recollections of my childhood. If any hidden peril threatens my destiny, oh! speak—for pity, speak!"

"Unhappy child! I know not what voice it is, that tells me, it were a grievous sin to leave you in your error; and that, one day, to divine or human vengeance it must grievously be answered."

The sentiments to which she was yielding were so generous, and so noble were the thoughts by which she was agitated, that, for a moment, her features wore an expression that was almost beautiful. I listened, in unspeakable anxiety, when Servien knocked at the door, and entered, with a letter on a silver salver. My heart beat fearfully: I felt a dread presentiment that this fatal chance, which was interrupting Mademoiselle de Maran, would conceal from my eyes for ever what she was on the point of revealing.

"What is it?" cried my aunt, with an expression of impatience that was almost painful.

"A letter, madam," answered Servien, presenting the salver.

Mademoiselle de Maran snatched it abruptly, and cried, "Go!"

I breathed again. I thought that my aunt was about to proceed with her narrative; for the expression of her face had not altered, and she even appeared so much preoccupied, that she cast the letter down upon her desk, without unsealing it. Fate willed that the direction should be turned upward, as it fell—the handwriting caught her eye—she took it hastily, and opened it.

All hope vanished—that letter appeared to act on her with the force and speed of lightning—her features resumed their wonted expression of irony and harshness. Her frowning eyebrows wore a more malignant aspect than I ever witnessed. One moment she sat like one thunderstruck—then, in a hoarse voice, furiously crushing up the letter,

"And I—" she exclaimed—"I was just going—Ah! what could have ailed me? I was mad, I believe—this little girl had bewitched me. I was committing the most simple blunders of good-nature, while *he*—ah! may hell confound him! Happily, I have yet the time——"

These words of my aunt, uttered with long pauses of reflective silence, alarmed me.

"Madam," I said, trembling, "just now you were about to make an important disclosure to me."

"Just now I was a fool, an idiot—do you understand?" she replied, with a sharp and violent accent. "I believe, God forgive me! I was in the melting mood—Ha, ha, ha!—and this little pup believed it all, never imagined that I was quizzing her, with my sensibilities. I am a very melting person, to be sure!"

"I did believe your emotion, madam—yes, you were moved, you will deny it to no purpose. I saw your tears flow. Ah! madam, in the name of those tears, which the memory of my father perhaps called forth, leave me not in this state of torturing anxiety. Yield to the generous feeling which led you to open your arms to me. It will be too cruel, madam, to have filled my heart with distrust—distrust the most cruel, because it may attach to any one, and make me suspect those whom I love the best."

"Really! does it seem so to you? Well, so much the better! it will give you occupation—to find the key to this enigma. It will be a very nice amusement, this—and I will promise to tell you, if you guess rightly."

"Madam," I said, indignant at the cold smile of my aunt, "you said, just now, yourself, that you must answer it to divine, or human justice, if—"

"Ha—ha—ha!" cried my aunt, interrupting me with a burst of sardonic laughter. "So—so! Do you think me with the king's police, or the thunders of the Vatican, with your divine and human justice? Do not you see that I was joking? it is very natural that one should be merry on a wedding-day! I know that you are going to tell me about my love tears. Now, my little darling, I am going to tell you a secret, which may stand you in stead, one of these days, to soften Gontran, in one of those moods from which the best-managed family is never free. Look you—a little grain of snuff in the corner of each eye, and you will weep like Magdalen. Then, such fine eyes as yours must be irresistible when they weep!"

"But, madam——"

"Ah! yes, I had forgotten. I have some things there, which your mother desired, in her will, should be given to you on the day of your marriage. I was going to give them to you just now; but I have thought better of it. I will give them to you this evening, after you are married;" and, as she spoke, she rose and locked her writing-desk.

"Ah! madam, grant me these at least. You are about to leave me very sad, very much frightened by your cruel silence; these last proofs of my mother's love will at the least console me."

"It is impossible," said Mademoiselle de Maran; "the clause in the will is positive. Once married, I will give them to you. But what! five o'clock already, and I not dressed? leave me, dear little girl."

As she said this, my aunt rung for one of her women, who came in and told her that something had been brought into the drawing-room for me, on the part of M. le Vicomte de Lancry.

"Go quick: I make no doubt but it is your *corbeille*," said my aunt; "and to judge from the taste of Gontran, I doubt not it will be both beautiful and magnificent."

I left the room of Mademoiselle de Maran, oppressed with bitter griefs.

When I considered, what could be this secret which she would have confided to me, I recalled to mind a second time what the Duchess de Richeville had told me. And yet—I had not the least distrust of Gontran. Had not he, himself, gone far beyond all my suspicions, in confessing to me all the ill-deeds of which he could be accused?—Besides, I loved him passionately. I had the deepest confidence in him.

I only felt myself so perfectly assured, so charmed with my prospects of future happiness, because they would be in his charge. It was the same thing with the friendship of Ursula; I believed her to be as devoted, as sincere to me, as I knew myself to be to her.

The cruel uneasiness which Mademoiselle de Maran had poured into my heart, seemed then to hover, as it were, over the only true affections that I felt; threatening them both, and yet attacking neither.

I found in the drawing-room the *corbeille* which M. de Lancry had sent me. As my aunt had foreseen, nothing could be richer or more elegant; diamonds, trinkets, laces, cachemire shawls, stuffs of all kinds, in exquisite taste and profusion; but I was too sad to enjoy their wondrous beauty. Had they not come from Gontran, I should have scarce looked at them.

However, by dint of striving to guess the mystery which Mademoiselle de Maran concealed from me, I ended by bringing myself to believe that her emotion, which I had at first thought very sincere, had not been so; and that her only object had been to torment me, and to make me a *cruel adieu!*

The sight of Gontran, who came a little while before the hour appointed for the fixing of the contract, and his affectionate expressions, in the end altogether reassured me.

At nine o'clock, my family and that of Gontran were assembled in the grand drawing-room of the Hotel de Maran.

I was beside my aunt and M. de Versac; the notary had just come in—when, almost at the same moment, the evident cracking of whips, and the echoing sound of a carriage entering the court at the full speed of many horse, was distinctly heard by all.

I looked to my aunt; she turned pale—actually livid.

A moment afterward, M. de Mortagne stood at the door of the drawing-room.

CHAPTER XXIV.

M. DE MORTAGNE.

HAD it not been for the strongly-marked features of M. de Mortagne, it would have been impossible to recognise him. His beard, his hair had become perfectly white, his forehead wrinkled, his eyes sunk, and their orbits darkened; his cheeks deeply hollowed—all spoke of long and cruel sufferings. His dress was as careless as his wont.

This almost ominous apparition, in the midst of a room glittering with gold, and blazing with lights—filled with men and women, splendidly dressed, presented a strange contrast to the scene.

At first, the assembled guests remained mute with astonishment. M. de Mortagne came straight up to me, took both my hands, and looked at me for many moments. The fierce expression of his features passed away: he kissed me affectionately on the forehead, and said,

'At length, here I am—provided, only, I am yet in time;" and looking at me, even more attentively—"It is her mother, all! the very picture of her poor mother! Well can I comprehend the hatred of that monster!"

The first stroke of surprise over, Mademoiselle de Maran recovered her habitual audacity, and cried out resolutely,

'What is it you come here to do, monsieur?"

Without replying in particular to her, M. de Mortagne exclaimed in a voice of thunder, "I come here to convict three persons of unworthy trickery, and base avarice! Those three—are you, Mademoiselle de Maran; you, Monsieur d'Orbeval; and you, Monsieur de Versac!"

My aunt swayed herself to and fro, in her arm-chair; M. d'Orbeval turned pale with fright; M. de Versac rose; but his nephew cried out quickly,

"Monsieur de Mortagne, beware! M. le Duc de Versac is my uncle; to insult him, is to insult me."

"Your turn will come, Monsieur de Lancry, but not yet. First the causes, then the consequences!" said M. de Mortagne, coldly.

I caught the hand of Gontran, and said to him very low, in a voice of supplication,

"What does it signify to you? I love you; be not angered against M. de Mortagne; he was the sole protector of my childhood."

M. de Mortagne went on—

"I expect threats and outcries; all this is very plain. Who would prevent my speaking, fears what I shall speak!"

"No one fears aught, sir, but your insults," exclaimed my guardian.

"When I shall have spoken what I shall speak, I shall be at his orders whom I have offended."

"But this is an insufferable tyranny," cried Mademoiselle de Maran, "which you shall not inflict upon us, for all your furious airs of braggart, coward, and *Ravasse-ton-bras!*"

"In truth, it is intolerable," said M. de Versac; "one cannot conceive such brutality in a man of birth."

"It is both calumny and defamation," said my guardian.

"You fear, then, my disclosures, since you would stifle my voice," said M. de Mortagne. "You fear, then, that I may dissuade this wretched girl from the marriage that you would have her to contract?"

"Monsieur!" cried Gontran, "it is to me, now, to me! do you hear! to me! that you are to speak; and to speak, too, without concealment. So highly honoured, so truly happy, as I am, in the hope of being united to Mademoiselle Matilda; yet, would I renounce, this instant, that dear hope, if there could rest upon her mind the slightest doubt——"

I, in my turn, now interrupted M. de Lancry, by saying to M. de Mortagne, "I am quite sure that your conduct is dictated by the affection which you bear me. I have not forgotten your past kindness; but I entreat you, not a word more. Nothing in all the world can change my resolution."

"But I, mademoiselle, I *will* change mine. Yes! cruel as the resolve may be, I will reject your hand this instant, if monsieur do not explain."

"It is all that I ask," replied M. de Mortagne.

"This is absurd," cried Mademoiselle de Maran, pale with rage. "But you can have no blood in your veins! no! not one of you all, to suffer this fellow to dictate to you, just escaped, as he is, from the Bicetre!"[*]

"Escaped from the dungeon vaults of Venice—wherein you have kept me plunged for eight years, by your infernal schemes!" cried M. de Mortagne, with a voice of thunder, seizing Mademoiselle de Maran roughly by the arm, and shaking her in furious anger.

"He will murder me—he is capable of anything!" cried my aunt.

"And thou, most infernal creature! of what art not thou capable? Thy treachery—has it not made me suffer a thousand and a thousand deaths? Behold my hair blanched, my brow furrowed up by agony!—eight years of agony! Hear'st thou!—Eight years of agony! and I will have my revenge, if I pursue thee to thy life's end! And yet, I know not why I do not even now rid earth of a monster such as thou!" and with the word, he cast her violently back into her arm-chair.

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[*] Bicetre—the prison of the galley-convicts.

The scene was so sudden—the accusation which M. de Mortagne brought against my aunt seemed so extraordinary, that all the persons present were panic-stricken and amazed.

Mademoiselle de Maran, although dreaded, was so universally detested, that her *friends* were not sorry to be the involuntary witnesses of a scene so strangely scandalous. The brow of Mademoiselle de Maran was covered with a cold sweat—she scarcely breathed, but stared at M. de Mortagne with a wild and terrified expression.

"You know not how I discovered your abominable plot!" he continued, addressing my aunt, and drawing some papers from his pocket—"Do you recognise this letter to the Governor of Venice; do you recognise these incendiary proclamations?

"All this astonishes you, gentlemen," continued M. de Mortagne, seeing the looks of curiosity that were fixed on these mysterious papers; "you do not understand me yet, that I can readily believe! Never was plot more malignantly, and, at the same time, more ably conceived. Now, listen, all of you, and learn to know this woman!"

"It is eight years ago, that I accused her, before all of you who compose the council of my niece's family, of bringing up this unhappy child like a cruel stepmother. I demanded that you should withdraw her from her care. You refused my demand. I was alone, you were many. I submitted! When I was obliged to go hence, I hoped soon to return to Paris, and, with or without your consent, to exercise a supervision over the education of Matilda. The very thoughts of my return filled her aunt with dismay: you shall hear how she hindered it. You tremble, all of you, before this woman. But perchance you will have the courage to admit the blackness of her soul, if any soul there be in that body."

"And will you endure this? and will you suffer me to be thus insulted?" cried Mademoiselle de Maran, turning toward the audience.

No one replied a word to her.

"It is eight years ago," continued M. de Mortagne, "that I set out for Italy. I was to wait at Naples for the young Count of Rochegune, the son of one of my best friends. That youth of generous and ardent soul was to have gone with me, to fight for a time in the cause of the Greeks. I was an entire stranger to the plots which were in being among the secret societies of Italy. I arrived at Venice—for a time I was not disturbed; but one night the police made a descent on me, seized my papers, all my property, cast me into prison—into secret confinement. I protested my innocence—defied the world to show the least proof of guilt against me. I was answered, that the Austrian Government had received information of my plans—that I was taking an active part in the proceedings of the secret societies. I denied the charge loudly. They produced my trunks, and in one with a false bottom, of which I knew not the existence, found several sealed packages."

"Any one must be as mad as this man himself," cried Mademoiselle de Maran, "who can listen seriously to such a mass of twattle! As for me, I will hear no more of it!" and she arose as if to withdraw.

"As you will; go! It is not to you that I record these infamous secrets. You have already the secret of them by heart!"

Mademoiselle de Maran sat down once more, actually shuddering with rage.

M. de Mortagne went on: "The packets were opened, and within were found the most incendiary proclamations—an appeal to the lodges of the Carbonari, a plan of insurrection against the Austrian Government, and a number of mysterious letters postmarked Paris, which I was supposed to have read, promising me a convention of all the freemen of Lombardy. The appearances were overpowering; I remained myself thunderstruck by this inexplicable fact. I was questioned as to my opinions; I had not the cowardice to deny them. I answered that I was devoted to one cause alone—that of holy, and pure, and unsullied freedom! These men could not comprehend that, because I had the courage to avow opinions sufficient even to destroy me, I ought to be believed, when I swore by my honour that I was ignorant of the existence of those perilous papers. I was cast into a dungeon—I remained therein eight years. I have come forth, as you perceive, decrepit before my time. Now, would you learn how I became possessed of these dangerous documents? A short time before I set forth for Italy, Servien, her worthy servant, was sent to one of my men who was to accompany me, under the pretence of getting certain foreign goods introduced into Italy, and of thereby realising a great profit. He persuaded him, without my knowledge, to have a false bottom made to my trunk, to hide therein the pretended packages of English lace. Once at Venice, a correspondent, he was told, would call upon him for the lace, and give him five-and-twenty guineas for his trouble. The weak wretch, ignorant of the danger, accepted the commission. I set off, and, at nearly the same time, there was sent a letter directed to the governor of Venice—

"'M. de Mortagne, ancient officer of the empire, well known for the extravagance of his revolutionary principles, and his connexion with the anarchists of all countries, will arrive at Venice in the course of the month of May. The proofs of his dangerous designs will be found in the false bottoms of several of his trunks.'

"Well! is this infamy enough?" said M. de Mortagne, crossing his arms upon his breast, and looking indignantly on Mademoiselle de Maran.

She, though astounded for a moment, recovered her audacity, and cried,

"And what is there in common, sir, between me and your packages of lace, filled with conspiracies? Is it my fault that, finding your revolutionary plots unmasked, you invented an absurd story, which, of course, no one credited? Who will believe that I amused myself with fabricating proclamations, and that I made one of my own servants my confidant in such fine actions? Come, sir, you are mad—there is not one word of truth in the whole of this—I deny it."

"You deny it? and will your wretched Servien deny the sworn deposition of my servant, who formally accuses him of having given him the packets?"

"Your servant!" cried my aunt, bursting into a fit of loud laughter; "here is a pretty sort of evidence, indeed, and likely to be admitted. Like master, like valet, monsieur! Is not your course, of old, well known? What is there wonderful, that the letter you have just read to us should have been sent to the governor of Venice? Is it because you have never declared yourself the champion of the *brethren and friends* of all countries? The police here, which has you in surveillance, probably advised the Austrian police, in sisterly fashion, of your projects—that is quite natural—that happens every day. So leave me alone, with your packets of lace stuffed with conspiracies: that is a tale of Mother Goose. You wanted to play the Brutus, the Washington, the Lafayette; and they caged you—that's all! You groan about your grey hairs—what have I got to do with that? We know, quite well, that the *leads** at Venice are not fountains of youth! If, in consequence, your wits have gone astray, as it seems they have, you had better take cold baths, and leave us quiet, for you are not endurable."

The cruel sarcasms of Mademoiselle de Maran, contrary to my expectations, found M. de Mortagne invulnerable. He answered, with perfect sang-froid, "Thanks to the active friendship of Mademoiselle de Richeville, Monsieur de Rochegune, and some others of my friends, I am again at liberty. In spite of your shameless audacity, we have sure proofs enough to nail you to the pillory of public opinion—and I will do it."

"We shall see, if you will, monsieur."

"And you shall not be the only one. I will nail there your accomplices, likewise—those who, from cowardice, selfishness, or avarice, have served your wicked ends. Do you hear, Monsieur de Lancry? Do you hear, Monsieur d'Orbeval? Do you hear, Monsieur de Versac?"

A burst of indignation followed these words of M. de Mortagne; but he persisted, unabashed.

"I do not even know, messieurs, if your conduct be not yet more detestable than that of Mademoiselle de Maran: at least, she hates me—she hates my niece; and although hatred is an odious passion, it shows, at least, a certain degree of energy. But, you three have striven, with cowardice, selfishness, and avarice——"

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* Cells immediately under the leads, used to torture the prisoners, by insufferable heat in summer, as the wells were by cold in winter.

"Go on, monsieur—go on!" cried Gontran, pale with rage.

"There was a day, doubtless, when you, Monsieur de Versac, said to Mademoiselle de Maran, 'My nephew is over head in debt; he is a reckless gambler; the world shuts its eyes, as yet, to the scandal of his adventures; but he embarrasses me: if he gets into any bad predicament, I shall be obliged, by appearances, to extricate him. Your niece is very rich; let us arrange this marriage: my nephew's debts will be paid, and I shall have no more trouble.'"

"Monsieur," said M. de Versac, with perfect urbanity, "I will pray you to observe, that, what you do me the honour to say, is entirely without foundation; and that——"

"Monsieur le Duc," replied M. de Mortagne, "if you had a daughter, whom you loved dearly, would you give her to your nephew? answer—upon your honour!"

"It does not seem to me, monsieur, that we are on such terms of intimacy, that I should necessarily make you my confidant on this subject!"

"This evasion is overwhelming for your nephew, sir," replied M. de Mortagne.

Gontran was on the point of bursting into a fit of rage; but I restrained him by my entreaties, and M. de Mortagne went on—

"Mademoiselle de Maran probably reflected on this proposition. Yes, she asked herself, if the gentleman proposed combined all the faults and vices necessary to render her niece—whom she abhors—utterly miserable, Monsieur de Lancry appeared to her gifted with all the qualities requisite to the purpose. She gave her word to Monsieur de Versac—and then commenced this detestable intrigue. Is there no such thing as human justice? and shall this go unpunished?" cried M. de Mortagne, with noble indignation. "Here is a young orphan girl, isolated from her very infancy, severed from all affection, left to herself, without support—without advice: a man, gifted with fascinations the most attractive, is introduced at every instant of the day; every honourable rival is excluded: she is delivered up to this man—to this man alone—to this man, broken in, long ago, to the intrigues of gallantry. This poor girl, inexperienced, unaccustomed to the cruelties, to the secret malice, of a stepmother—listens, with artless and delighted confidence, to the hypocritical whispers—to the lying promises, of this man. Ignorant of the danger which she is running, she never perceives that she is in love, until that love is rooted in her very soul. The happy child has not a friend—has not a relative, to enlighten her on the dangers she is running—on the position, on the previous conduct, of this man who deceives her!"

"Enough! monsieur, enough!" I exclaimed, burning with indignation, for I felt cruelly what must be the sufferings of Gontran. "It is I, I only, who must answer this! Instead of hiding from me the past, with which you so bitterly reproach him, M. de Lancry, full of loyalty and frankness, was beforehand in giving me that information which otherwise I could not have gained. He said to me, 'I will not deceive you—my youth has been dissipated; I have played, I have been a prodigal.' But, when M. de Lancry would have told me of his fortunes, told me how little he possessed now, it was I—I who would not hear him. I have not, then, been deceived into giving my hand to M. de Lancry; I have a deep trust, an absolute confidence in the promises he has made me, in the assurances he has given me, in the future happiness for which I look at his hands! And, while bitterly lamenting this sad dispute, I am happy—ay! very happy, to be able here, solemnly and aloud, to declare, that I am proud of the choice I have made."

M. de Mortagne looked at me, with melancholy surprise.

"Matilda! Matilda! poor child, you are deceived—you know not what awaits you!"

"Monsieur, I shall for ever respect the motives which have dictated your conduct; and I hope, that one day, you will recover from your unjust prejudices against M. de Lancry."

Then going to the table, where the contract lay, I signed it hastily, and said to M. de Mortagne,

"Here is my answer, monsieur;" and I gave the pen to Gontran.

M. de Mortagne rushed toward me crying, in a voice full of pathos, almost of supplication,

"Pity her! you are young—it cannot be, that every noble feeling is eradicated from your heart. Mercy for Matilda! mercy for so much candour, for so much truth, for so much generosity! Do not abuse your influence over her—you know that you cannot make her happy. Is it her fortune that you covet? speak, monsieur! I am rich."

At this last offer, which was in itself an insult, Gontran turned pale as ashes with resentment.

"Sign! oh, sign!" said I, with a faltering voice, to De Lancry.

"Yes, yes, I will sign!" he replied with a voice of restrained anger; "not to sign, would be to avow myself guilty—to deserve the insults of this man! not to sign, would be to confess myself unworthy of you, Matilda!" and Gontran signed the contract.

"Say, then, what is the truth—that not to sign, would be to renounce the fortune which you covet; for you are unworthy to understand, much less to appreciate, the good qualities of this angel. In two months you will treat her as brutally as you have done your mistresses—if some one takes not order with it!"

"Gontran!" said I, quite low, to M. de Lancry, "I am your wife! grant me my first request: not a word to M. de Mortagne, I implore you. Put an end to this scene, which is killing me."

Gontran reflected for some moments, and then said to me with a gloomy air—

"Be it so, Matilda. You ask much of me; but I grant it to you."

"The sacrifice is consummated," said M. de Mortagne. "It was so fated! But come, now, courage. It remains for me, now, more than ever, to watch over you, Matilda. If I can, it remains for me to render less fatal to you, the consequences of your terrible imprudence—to hinder the calamities which I foresee. Be tranquil; wherever you shall be, there will I be—whithersoever you shall go, thither will I go. That monster"—pointing to Mademoiselle de Maran—"has been your evil genius—I will be your guardian genius—and here I declare relentless war, merciless, pitiless, against all our enemies, be they who they may! My hair is white; my brow is wrinkled; but God has left me the energy of heart, and of devotedness! Alas! poor child! I come late, indeed, in your life; but, I trust, not *too late!* Farewell! my child! farewell! I will sign your contract; I will take part in your marriage—it is my right; it is my duty. At this moment, more than ever, I claim to perform the duty and the right."

And, going to the table, he signed the contract with a firm hand. The voice, the features, of M. de Mortagne, bore such a stamp of authority, that no one spoke. When he signed, he said,

"Monsieur d'Orbeval, Monsieur de Versac, Monsieur de Lancry—I retract nothing that I have said—it is true. I maintain, and will maintain, that it is true, here and everywhere. Ten years ago, I would have added—'I will sustain it, sword in hand!' to-day, I will say no more. My life belongs to this child—who, I see, has no one left to her in all the world, save I. Smile not disdainfully, young man; the world knows that Monsieur de Mortagne has no fear!" Then, stretching out his right hand, he made, with the fore-finger, a threatening and imperious gesture at De Lancry, saying, "If you repair not your past life—if, by the most grateful affection—if, by an adoration manifested at all moments, you do not render yourself worthy of this angel; it is you, who will have to tremble before me! Oh! furious glances have no weight with me. I have tamed fiercer things than you."

And with a firm, slow step, M. de Mortagne withdrew.

Scarce was he gone, when the sort of stupor, which that singular man had spread around, appeared to vanish. Every one attacked him; depreciated him; accused him of madness! It was remembered, that, nine years ago, he had made escapades as strange and as wild as this. The interest he had excited for a moment, by relating the treacheries of Mademoiselle de Maran, had grown cold already; and almost all our relations began to rally about my aunt, declaring that they did not believe a word of M. de Mortagne's fable, touching the cause of his captivity in Venice.

A few minutes after his departure, we betook ourselves to the mayoralty.

Despite the cruel scene which I had witnessed, my blind confidence in M. de Lancry was in nowise weakened. M. de Mortagne and Madame de Richeville accused him of faults which he had confessed, and for which he had found excuses, and almost a justification, in his love for me. I believed him; and I felt nothing but irritation against M. de Mortagne, and a redoubling of my love for Gontran. I went so far even, as to accuse myself of causing the grievous scene which he had encountered; and promised myself to make up to him for it, by infinite devotedness.

If you are surprised, my friend, at my persisting in the accomplishment of this marriage, in spite of so many warnings, both vague and definite, it is because you know not the blind and intractable obstinacy of love—which but increases the more for the opposition it encounters.

It was with a sort of religious zeal that I replied *yes*, when I was asked if I took Gontran for my husband. The ceremony ended, we returned to the hotel of Mademoiselle de Maran.

The morning following, we proceeded to the chapel of the Chamber of Peers, where the marriage was to take place at nine o'clock. The first person I saw, as I entered, was M. de Mortagne. Not having been informed on the previous evening, it had not been in his power to be present at the civil marriage.

Monseigneur the Bishop of Amiens united us. His address to Gontran was grave, serious, almost severe. It appeared to me that my husband was judged by his past conduct, and I felt almost proud of the sort of conversion which his love for me was about to work in him for the future. When we left the chapel, we entered a drawing-room, which Monsieur the Chancellor had kindly placed at our disposition. I was near the window with Gontran and Mademoiselle de Maran, waiting for M. de Versac, in order to go with him home, when M. de Mortagne advanced toward us.

I saw the eyes of Gontran sparkle with fury.

Frightened, I caught him by the arm, saying, "Recollect your promise, Gontran;" but he shook me off, almost harshly, saying, "It is well—I know what I have got to do. Then drawing near to M. de Mortagne, he said, in a hoarse voice,

"I have endured your insults and your threats, monsieur, so long as I had a reason for enduring them—these reasons exist no longer; and you must give me satisfaction, now that Mademoiselle Matilda is my wife."

But Mademoiselle de Maran caught Gontran by the arm, her eyes sparkling with fiendish malignity, and said, pointing to M. de Mortagne,

"Henceforth, monsieur must be sacred—inviolable in your eyes—do you understand? Whatever he may say—whatever he may do—you must endure all from him."

"I must endure all from him?" cried Gontran. "Wherefore so?"

"Wherefore so?"—and Mademoiselle de Maran, darting at M. de Mortagne and myself a glance like that of a viper, said with her hideous smile, "You must endure all from M. de Mortagne, my poor friend Gontran, for a very simple reason—a man cannot fight THE FATHER OF HIS WIFE!"

M. de Mortagne stood thunderstruck!—Gontran gazed at her with astonishment. I, for a moment or two, did not even understand the hideous bearing of those execrable words of Mademoiselle de Maran. Then—when they shot through my brain, scorching it like a shaft of flame, I only cried out, "O! my mother!"—and fell fainting.

Many a year has elapsed since that horrid scene, my friend—many a time have I wept bitterly to think of it—I weep even now as I revert to it. Oh! my mother! my mother!—holiest, best of women!—Oh! you whose angelic virtue beamed with so pure a splendour, that the fiend who caused your slow agonies never so much as dared attempt to calumniate you living! Oh! my mother!—it was not till your ashes had long been cold in the quiet grave, that sacrilegious hate dared even to profane your memory.

Such was my childhood—such my first youth up to the period of my marriage. My spirit is downcast and overwhelmed. These recollections have so deeply—so variously agitated my mind, that I must pause and collect myself a little, before I attempt to relate to you the second period of my life.

END OF PART I.

PART II.

MARRIED LIFE.

CHAPTER I.

THE RETREAT.

On leaving the chapel of the Luxembourg, after the celebration of my marriage with M. de Lancry, what was my astonishment, on perceiving a carriage with post-horses attached to it! Mademoiselle Blondeau was seated in the rumble. M. de Lancry's valet was standing at the coach door.

"Where are we going, then?" said I to Gontran.

"Will you not confide yourself to me?" replied he, smiling.

I hurried into the carriage, delighted with the reflection that I should no more see Mademoiselle de Maran; the atrocious and unfounded calumny she had uttered against my mother had completed my aversion to her. It was in vain that Gontran argued, that such calumnies should be treated, not merely as mischievous, but as utter madness; that odious suspicions, carried to such a length, destroyed themselves; I felt, that from that time forward it would be impossible for me to hold any intercourse with Mademoiselle de Maran.

The carriage drove off at a rapid rate. During the three hours which our journey occupied, Gontran was delicately and gracefully attentive to me; he spoke but little; but when he did, his words were full of touching goodness, though at the same time almost grave and pensive. He doubtless felt, as I did, that the approach to great felicity requires a solemn and earnest meditation. There is nothing more serious, more pensive, than happiness, when it is actually within our grasp.

I was moved, even to tears, when I observed the look of protecting tenderness with which Gontran frequently observed me. Never, I believe, did I feel my soul more elevated; never were my aspirations more generous. I reflected with delight on all the great, the pious duties which I should now have to fulfil. I contemplated the future with calm and proud serenity, and waited with religious impatience for the moment when I should be able to prove to M. de Lancry the full value of my heart.

When I considered, that perhaps by the influence of my affection, I should become indispensable to the happiness of Gontran, I felt for a moment that glorious infatuation, that magnificent pride, which must burn in the bosom of ambitious men.

We arrived at Chantilly. It was the latter part of April. The half-veiled sun shed a soft and misty light. To my great astonishment our carriage entered the forest; we drove along the picturesque margin of Queen Blanche's lake, and arrived at the skirts of the woods, which approach the wilderness.

M. de Lancry handed me out of the carriage, which he sent away with his valet. Madame Blondeau alone remained with us.

Gontran smiled at my surprise, and offered me his arm. We followed a small path, which was already perfumed with the odors of violets and primroses. After walking a few minutes, we arrived at a hawthorn hedge, covered with blossoms, in the centre of which was a rustic wooden door.

Blondeau opened it, and we went in.

I saw a miniature house and a garden, which would both have stood in the grand saloon of the hotel de Maran.

Never was there a cottage more coquettishly ornamented, than this sweet place; the roof was formed by steps, on which were placed flower-pots, hid in moss; the garden was so completely covered with rose-trees, heliotropes, jasmines, gillyflowers, and small Persian lilacs, that it resembled an immense flower-stand, or rather a gigantic bouquet.

Our little cottage consisted only of a ground floor; there was one small sitting room, in which I had the sweet surprise to find my piano, my harp, and the books which I had left the evening before at the hotel de Maran. It appeared a perfect miracle! On the right were two small rooms for me; on the left, two similar ones for Gontran. At the bottom of the garden was a thatched cabin, containing a room for Blondeau, and the kitchen.

To describe the unspeakable and fairy-like elegance of this little Eden, would be as impossible as to depict my gratitude toward Gontran, or my almost childish joy, when I reflected that we were about to reside there for some time.

M. de Lancry laughingly asked Blondeau, whether she should be able to prepare a dinner for us every day.

Blondeau answered very proudly, that she would astonish us with her culinary art: for she alone was to attend upon us, during our stay at the cottage.

Need I tell you, how fully I appreciated this delicate attention of Gontran?

It was hardly three o'clock: I took my husband's arm, and we set out for a long walk into the forest.

The sun had, little by little, dispelled the clouds which had enshrouded him; the air was embalmed, saturated with the odors of the thousand blossoms of spring; the leaves,—still of a delicate green—trembled to the slightest breathings of the wind; birds of all kinds were warbling and fluttering from branch to branch of the magnificent trees; their sweet and joyous notes alone disturbing the profound silence of the forest.

My heart beat violently. I inhaled, with ineffable avidity, all these perfumes, all these sweet emanations of nature.

I leaned more heavily on Gontran's arm; we walked slowly: hardly did we, from time to time, exchange a few vague and unmeaning words.

I endeavoured, at one moment, to recall some impressions of my earliest youth, and strange to say, I found it almost impossible.

The past appeared to me vague, shrouded; my recollection seemed to fly from me. I have never been able to explain to myself this singular sensation. Was it, that present happiness invaded and absorbed every faculty, to such a degree as to deprive me of my memory?

These feelings became at last so powerful, that I half-closed my eyes; I could not move a step farther; my head fell upon Gontran's shoulder, and I clasped his arm with both my hands.

Gontran, who doubtless felt the same emotions, stopped, but did not disturb this ineffable torpor of my feelings.

"Pardon me," said I to him, after some minutes' silence, "I am very weak and childish, am I not? But I cannot overcome it; so much happiness is beyond my strength. Oh! how happy must you feel, inspiring me with so much love?"

"You are right, Matilda, for to inspire it, is to feel it! It is I who ought to ask your forgiveness for my silence. And yet not so, for there is a language even in silence—it expresses more than words can render. Tell me, Matilda, what words could express that which we now feel!"

"Oh! 'tis true: it seems to me, also, that words should be withheld, when the soul communes with itself. But," added I, smiling, "you will think this very metaphysical, very ridiculous. See how much reason there is in what you have said. I wish to explain these delightful impressions, and I talk nonsense. Let us continue our walk, and let our hearts discourse silently together."

The sun was about setting, when we returned to the cottage, which we found almost darkened by the shades of evening, so thickly planted were the trees by which it was surrounded.

In the saloon we found, with pleasure, a sparkling fire, made of pine cones, which Blondeau had lighted, for the spring evenings were still cold. A neat little dinner-table was laid out near the fire-place.

Gontran acknowledged, frankly, that he felt well-disposed to do honor to the talents of my governess. She had surpassed herself. Our dinner was very gay; we waited on ourselves. I tried to anticipate his wishes—he the same with mine; from this arose a hundred lively discussions, which all terminated by his ceding to me.

After dinner, he opened the door of the parlor, placed a large arm-chair near it, in which I sat down.

"Only observe what a lovely evening!" said he to me.

The magnificent moon threw its silvery light upon our garden, and on the summits of the trees surrounding it. A most solemn silence reigned throughout the forest. Above our heads, the stars glittered in the firmament; around us, the flowers emitted their sweet perfumes.

Gontran seated himself at my feet. His noble and handsome face was turned toward me; the pale rays of the moon played upon his forehead and on his brow. He held one of my hands in his, and looked at me with ecstasy.

Strange contrast of our nature! At that moment, I believe I attained the *apogeum* of happiness; the man I loved with all my soul, was at my feet. The mysterious calm of a most lovely night, added to my enchantment. At this moment, however, an indefinable sadness took possession of my heart. I wept.

Gontran observed my tears; soon his eyes were moistened, also. I leaned my throbbing head on his, and our tears were mingled.

Alas! alas! why these tears? Are we, then, so unfortunately gifted, that the magnitude of certain happiness overwhelms us? Or, rather, does the involuntary sorrow it inspires, proceed from a presentiment, that its duration is so short?

What can I tell you of those happy and brilliant days, which passed so rapidly; of that life of love and solitude, which Heaven was pleased to surround with all its splendors; for the season continued admirably beautiful.

A sketch of the manner in which we passed our days, will make you comprehend the bitterness of my regret, when compelled to abandon this enchanting existence.

Very early, every morning—after admiring the baskets of jasmine and heliotrope, which never failed to be presented to me on my awaking, and which Gontran, himself, delighted to gather for me in our garden—we took a walk in the forest, treading down, with joy, the high grass sparkling with dew; inhaling the odors of aromatic plants, and watching the deer, as they retired into the thickest of the wood.

When the sun began to get high, we returned to breakfast; and there, the blinds of our little parlor being drawn down, enjoying the freshness of the air and shade, we rested from our morning walk, sometimes taking a siesta during the heat of the day.

Then I frequently opened my piano, and sang, with Gontran, some duets, or airs to which we attached some tender recollection. At other times we read. Gontran's voice had a most silvery tone; it was always a new delight to me, to hear him read one of my favorite poets. These sweet occupations were interrupted with lengthened conversations—with projects for the future, and tender recollections of the past. Then, before dinner, we retired to dress, and with as much coquetry and elegance, as if we were living in a palace filled with company.

I attached great value to the flatteries of Gontran; I took delight in dressing my own hair, that I might owe to myself alone the praises he bestowed upon me.

Notwithstanding the proofs of Madame Blondeau's talents, M. de Lancry, who frankly avowed his taste for a good table, had sent his chief cook to Chantilly; and by means of a *fourgon** perfectly well organized, our dinner was sent us every day, accompanied by ice and fruit: Blondeau had only to wait upon us.

Gontran had also horses at Chantilly. After dinner our caleche came for us, and we took long drives in the magnificent alleys of the forest. We returned sometimes at night, by moonlight, lulled by delightful reveries. The carriage then was sent away, and Blondeau served our tea.

Oh! what long evenings glided thus happily away! the door of our parlour remaining open; and we, enjoying the beauties of those lovely nights, whose silence was only interrupted by the light rustling of the leaves.

Oh! how many hours passed thus, while I, listening to the history Gontran gave me of his life, his early youth, the battles fought by his father, one of the heroes of La Vendée, who died bravely in those savage *landes* of Brittany, fighting for his faith, and for his king.

With what insatiable curiosity did I question Gontran, on the campaigns he himself had gone through—on the dangers he had encountered. The more I enquired into the past, thanks to his confidence, the more was I persuaded of the vanity—of the injustice—of the accusations of Madame de Richeville and M. de Mortagne.

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* A *fourgon* is a sort of covered wagon, used for conveying provisions on excursions, hunting parties, &c.

They had described Gontran to me, as a man of unequal temper; egotistical, harsh, deeply *blasè*, incapable of comprehending the delicacies of an exalted and virtuous love.

What was my joy, my pride! I had found Gontran full of softness, of kind attentions; and endowed, above all, with the most perfect and most exquisite tact.

This happiness lasted for three weeks.

One evening, while we were taking tea, Gontran said to me, smiling, "Matilda, I have a serious proposal to make to you."

"Oh! tell me what it is—tell me, my friend!"

"'Tis that we should for some time prolong our residence here!"

"Gontran—Gontran!"

"You accede to it then?"

"Do I accede? yes, with joy, with ecstasy! But you quite spoil me, Gontran; when we return to the world, what regrets! what sacrifices must we make—and for whom? for what?"

"You are right, Matilda," said Gontran, sighing. "For whom? for what? Our existence here is so delightful! and we must leave it, to throw ourselves into that shining gulph which people call the world!"

"But who compels us to do so, my dear friend? What is the use of fortune, if not to live according to our wishes. But no, you say this from kindness to me, Gontran! you are yet too young, too brilliant, to renounce the world!"

"Poor child!" said Gontran, smiling sweetly; "on the contrary, it is you who are too young to be deprived of pleasure, which you have scarcely known. Were this life we lead, and which you now find charming, long continued to you, it would become monotonous."

"Ah! Gontran, you say that I am beautiful! you would tire then of my beauty?"

"Matilda, how little do my words imply this!"

An unusual noise of footsteps and voices interrupted Gontran; there were persons talking, outside the hedge. Shortly afterward, some one knocked at the garden-gate. It was eleven o'clock. It alarmed me.

"I will open the gate," said Gontran to me.

"Good heaven! my beloved, take care!"

"There is nothing to be alarmed at; this forest is patrolled all night long, by the guards of the Duke of Bourbon."

"Who's there?" asked Gontran.

"It is I, sir, Germain."

He was one of M. de Lancry's grooms—my husband opened the gate.

"What do you want?"

"The Count de Lugarto's chasseur has brought a letter for you, sir; he came post from Paris: he knew that we were staying with the horses at Chantilly, and came to us there: he desired us to conduct him hither, having an important letter to deliver to you."

"Where is this man?"

"There, behind the gate, Viscount."

"Desire him to come in."

By the light of the lamp hanging in the parlor, I saw a tall man, dressed as a courier. He took off his hat and delivered a letter to Gontran.

From the moment of this man's arrival, M. de Lancry appeared much annoyed, almost depressed; he approached the lamp, opened the letter, and read it rapidly. Twice Gontran knit his brows; he appeared to me to repress a movement of impatience, or of anger. After having read the letter, he tore it, and then said to the courier:

"'Tis well; tell your master I will see him to-morrow at Paris:" then addressing his groom, M. de Lancry added, "Give orders to Pierre, to bring the travelling-carriage here to-morrow morning. The rest of you will start to-night for Paris, with the caleche and the horses. On arriving at the hotel, tell them to put everything in order, for I shall arrive there during the day."

The two servants being gone, I said to Gontran, with anxiety, "You appear vexed, dear husband, what is the matter?"

"Nothing, I assure you, nothing—an important service, which one of my friends, lately arrived from England, requires at my hands, obliges me to return to Paris sooner than I expected."

"What a pity to leave this retreat!" said I to Gontran, unable to restrain my tears.

"Come, come," said he gently to me; "what a child you are, Matilda!"

"But we shall return here, shall we not? This small house will be to us a living and sacred remembrance!"

"Doubtless—doubtless, Matilda: but I must leave you now. We must set off to-morrow, very early; for I must hasten to Paris. You must have some orders to give to Madame Blondeau. I must take a walk, for I have a slight head-ache."

"My beloved, permit me to accompany you."

"No, no, stay here."

"I beg you will let me, Gontran—particularly as you are not well."

"I tell you, again, I prefer to be alone," said M. de Lancry, rather impatiently, and went toward the garden-gate. I shed tears—they were bitter tears, this time.

Having retired to my chamber, I waited the return of Gontran. He came back in about an hour, walked for some time in the garden, with an agitated step, and then went into his own room.

CHAPTER II.

THE DEPARTURE.

I PASSED a night of agony, reflecting on the uneasiness, the agitation which M. de Lancry had not been able to conceal.

At break of day, I rose; I was painfully affected. I wished to take a last look at this mysterious, and charming retreat, where I had passed such happy days.

Alas! was this an omen? was so much happiness about to vanish, and for ever? The sky, which had been so clear during all this time, was now covered with black clouds; a cold wind moaned sorrowfully among the large trees of the forest.

The predisposition of the mind, is a prism which colors all exterior objects, by the reflection at its own gloomy, or brilliant tints. I made a childish observation at the time, but it pierced me to the heart. All the flowers which ornamented our dwelling had been transplanted, and brought thither, as for a rural decoration. Little by little, they had languished, and had faded. Absorbed by happiness, looking at everything through the bright rays which love had thrown around me, I had not perceived the gradual withering of these plants; but now, under this gloomy sky, thinking of our departure, which so much affected me, I was painfully struck by this, to me, sudden change in their appearance.

In spite of myself, I drew a vague comparison between the happy days I had just passed, and the existence of these flowers—poor ephemeral flowers! torn from their native soil, uprooted, and instead of opening every morning fresh and full of life, doomed to die precariously, after shining for a few hours, and scattering evanescent perfumes.

I shuddered, when I asked myself, whether the happiness I had enjoyed, was to be as fleeting. I endeavored, however, to escape from these afflicting thoughts: I considered them blasphemous.

I devoutly gathered some sprigs of heliotrope and jasmine, which I promised myself I would keep for ever. I reflected that, after all, it was folly in me to conjure up painful prognostics out of a state of things, which it depended but on myself to change. I determined upon establishing a gardener in our cottage, who should attend to the cultivation of flowers, which then would not fade so rapidly.

I returned to the cottage: Gontran appeared more full of thought than on the previous evening. The carriage arrived, and we soon departed.

M. de Lancry did not utter a word of regret, on abandoning our retreat to the care of his servants; this pained me. After a few moments silence, Gontran said to me, "Matilda, to-morrow I shall present to you one of my best, and most intimate friends, Lugarto, who has arrived from London. It is to render him an important service, that he has requested me to leave Chantilly. We shall often see Lugarto; I like him much; I wish you to receive him with kindness."

"Although M. Lugarto is the cause of our hurried return to Paris;" I replied, smiling at M. de Lancry, "I promise you to forget this great grievance, and to receive your friend as you desire. But you have never before spoken of him."

"I was at the same time so happy, and so absorbed by love," rejoined Gontran, affectionately, "that there are many things I did not mention to you. I left Lugarto at London: he is an idle fellow, and writes but seldom. I had too many charming compensations for his silence, to suffer me to notice his forgetfulness."

"You must be much attached to M. de Lugarto, to make such a sacrifice on his account: we were so happy in our retreat."

"Yes, yes, without doubt; but Lugarto formerly rendered me a great service: I will tell you all about it."

"Oh! then, my friend, if you are acquitting a debt of gratitude, I will not complain of it again. Moreover, I have a project of my own; I am about to ask a favour of you, which interests me much."

"Tell me, what is it?"

"Well! you must promise me to spend a few days, every month, in our cottage at Chantilly."

Gontran looked at me with astonishment. "But the house does not belong to me," said he.

I felt my heart sink within me. "How can this be?" I inquired.

"Nothing can be more natural. I had directed my man of business to find me a small house at Chantilly, or in some very retired spot, and to rent it for the season. He found this peasant's cabin almost wedged into the forest. I came to see it, and in point of situation it seemed delightful. I sent my architect, who is a good hand at decorations, for you see he has transformed a frightful hut, into a complete Swiss cottage, such as one sees at the opera. This was so much the more fortunate, as the proprietor of this hut and a few acres of land surrounding it, is about to sell it to the Duke de Bourbon: as soon as they have taken away what we have left in the house, it will be pulled down; I rented it for only four months, and I believe the time will be up in about three weeks more."

Alas! the words of Gontran cruelly reminded me of the observations I had made that morning, on the artificial brilliancy of the ephemeral flowers of our garden. Without meaning to do so, M. de Lancry had given me great pain. The man of business, the decoration, the hiring of the cottage;—all these words came one by one to dispel my cherished recollections. I was not foolish enough to think of escaping from all the realities of life, but it appeared to me that this little retreat ought to remain environed by all its poetry, and that without foolish prodigality, it might have been retained for ever.

I did not accuse Gontran; absorbed by present happiness, he had perhaps neglected thinking of the future: I reflected, that to woman alone is reserved the worship of the past.

"Gontran," said I, "I am quite proud of a thought which has just struck me; and which you, notwithstanding your ingeniously inventive head, have allowed to escape you."

"Speak, my dear Matilda."

"We must immediately purchase this house and the small fields that surround it, since, fortunately, it is not yet sold to the Duke de Bourbon."

"You do not recollect, Matilda, the prince will have to pay for the suitableness of the property; the owner would expect the same terms from us; and in such cases the pretensions of these people are exorbitant."

"But then, how much do you think it may be worth?"

"How can I tell? perhaps thirty or forty thousand francs, or even more—for it is impossible to assign a price to a thing merely valuable from its position."

"How! would it not cost more than that?" exclaimed I with joy.

"Child!" said Gontran, tenderly pressing my hand.

"What are thirty thousand francs, in comparison with——"

"Listen, Matilda!" said Gontran, kindly interrupting me; "as we are upon this chapter, let us talk reasonably. Domestic matters, it is said, are very dull to talk about, but very necessary; besides, I wish to know whether the arrangements I have made will suit you."

"Speak, my dear husband, but I have not yet done with our cottage: we will return to that subject presently."

Gontran shrugged his shoulders, smiling, looked at me, and continued: "You fully comprehend, Matilda, that our rank requires that we should keep a retinue and house in proportion to our fortune, which will enable you to partake in pleasures suitable to your age."

"Our cottage is the only house my heart desires."

"Let us speak seriously, Matilda. I will tell you the arrangements I have made. We shall have a *maitre d'hotel*—a confidential person, who will serve as steward—a valet for you, one for me, four footmen for the ante-chamber, and——"

"But, my dear friend, I can assure you, I would much rather reduce the number of these servants and keep our little paradise."

"Come, be reasonable. We must, first of all, my dear child, talk of expenses which are necessary. Our stable will consist of four carriage-horses and a coachman, for you; for me, two carriage-horses and two or three saddle-horses, with my English grooms; two women for your service, besides M. Blondeau! a cook, and kitchen girl, will complete our household. Pardon me these details, my dear Matilda, but when once this is agreed upon, we need not talk any more about it."

I am listening to you, and presently will make my observations upon it.

"We will reside at the hotel Rochegune, during the winter; then we will take a journey to the Baths, or to Italy, so as to arrive at your estate of Maran by the month of September, for the shooting season; there we will remain till December, when we will again return to Paris. You shall have, if you wish, one evening in the week to receive company. We will give a dinner party the same day. You shall fix your days for the theatres, and I will provide for you boxes at the academie and Italian opera. And finally, if you think a thousand francs a month sufficient for your toilette, we will fix that sum."

"My friend?——"

"One more word, and I have done," said Gontran, smiling: "You see that our style of living will be very plain. In our position in society it could not be less. Do not be angry with me, now, if I talk of large, ugly figures. Your income amounts to about one hundred and thirty thousand francs. With what remains of mine, we can calculate upon an income of one hundred and sixty thousand francs. But, deducting the purchase of the hotel Rochegune, the unpaid rents, and the savings which we ought rigorously to lay by, for unforseen events, we must not calculate on more than one hundred thousand francs. Well, my dear Matilda, it will cost all that, neither more nor less, to keep our house on the footing which I have told you. You see, we have only what may be termed the necessaries of luxury, without anything superfluous; for all the expenses I have stated, are absolutely indispensable.

"Whatever you do, will always be perfectly well done, my dear friend—although it appears to me, that one might live very happily without this great display of what you call necessaries; but whatever pleases you is right. I do not wish to see but with your eyes—to think, but with your thoughts. Only, should I be obliged to retrench upon the amount you allow me to obtain it, I will—you understand me—I will have my cottage at Chantilly. That is to me the most indispensable—the most necessary—the least superficial of all these expenses. This shall be my extravagance of the heart. We will, every now and then, make a pilgrimage to it. All our suite shall be my poor Blondeau.

"Come, come, be quiet now; we will talk of that another time, pretty little obstinate," said Gontran, gayly; "but I had forgotten! we must send our architect to your chateau of Maran. For the last twenty years it has not been inhabited but by your man of business; it must be almost in ruins."

"Without doubt, and then a chateau is so large. Scold me if you will, my dear friend, but I must speak. Your little cottage has quite spoiled me. Oh! how dull and stupid will spring appear to me in Paris, when compared with our lovely spring in the forest! See how rancorous I am. I really cannot forgive you."

"With regard to Lugarto," said Gontran, "you must excuse some rather cavalier ways he has, which are perhaps rather unusual in high life; but he has always been so spoiled."

"What do you mean?"

"Look you, Matilda, I cannot do better than to give you a portrait of Lugarto; you will know him when I present him to you. Lugarto is twenty-two, certainly not twenty-three years old; he is of Brazilian origin. His father, son of a slave of mixed blood, had been affranchised from his infancy.

This father had been steward to a great Portuguese nobleman, and managed his master's affairs so badly—or so adroitly—that he completely ruined him, and himself acquired the greater part of his property. This was the foundation of a considerable fortune, which afterward became colossal; for speculations and some grants of mines in South America so much augmented his wealth, that, at his death, he left his son more than sixty millions of francs.* The father of Lugarto lived in the colonies with the pomp and depravity of a satrap—utterly vicious—living openly in revolting debauchery, as cowardly as he was wicked. It is said, that in a fit of ferocious anger, he ill-treated his wife to such a degree that she died from the consequences of his violence."

"But such a man is a complete monster!" exclaimed I; "what a cruel and melancholy inheritance must such a name be. His son is to be pitied, notwithstanding his millions."

"The more to be pitied," replied Gontran, smiling bitterly, "that his father had set him so frightful an example. Left at fifteen years old, with a kingly fortune, Lugarto grew up amid excesses and adulations of all kinds. When only twenty years old, he felt the loathing and the satiety of age—thanks to the abuse of every pleasure to be procured with gold. Of a frail and delicate temperament, withered before it was developed, there is nothing youthful in him but his years. His face, notwithstanding that his features are agreeable, has something morbid, faded, and repulsive about it, which evinces a premature decay."

I listened to Gontran with astonishment, while tracing the portrait of Lugarto. His tone was that of biting sarcasm: he appeared to take pleasure in the melancholy picture he was giving of this man. At one moment, I was on the point of making this observation to Gontran, but some unaccountable scruple prevented me.

He continued: "Morally speaking, Lugarto is a man of profound depravity—without faith, without courage, without benevolence—accustomed to hold men in sovereign contempt: for almost all have vilely flattered his great wealth. By turns, madly prodigal, or sordidly avaricious, his lavish expenditure has but one motive—pride; but one aim—ostentation. The most cunning lawyer, is not better versed in business than Lugarto: he manages his immense fortune with incredible ability, and he continues to enrich himself, almost daily, by speculations, of themselves dishonorable. A faithful type of his father, the mean rapacity of the slave is in continual conflict with the ridiculous vanity of the freeman; everything in him, proves this two-fold nature. Though living luxuriously, his expenses are strictly calculated; and his ostentation, though gaudy, is parsimonious: all—even to the alms he ostentatiously bestows, without knowing the unfortunate whom he assists, but does not pity—is calculated for effect. Two incurable wounds, embitter, however, the almost imperial opulence of Lugarto—the lowness of his origin, and the consciousness of his want of personal merit. By a manœuvre, in which the only person deceived is himself, he has assumed the title of count, and has made up for himself the most ridiculous armorial bearings. Carried away by adulation, and by pride, they have become his torment. He knows that, to his fortune only, does he owe the attentions which are paid to him: were he poor, to-morrow he would be despised. When these thoughts come over him, his rage against his fate knows no bounds. But Lugarto, like his father, is as cowardly as he is wicked; and he revenges himself of this prosperity, so unjustly accumulated upon him, by treating, with the most cruel harshness, all those, who, from their dependence upon him, are compelled to bear his violence: women, even, are not safe from his brutalities. Well: notwithstanding all this—notwithstanding the most odious vices—the world has always welcomed him with smiles—the boldest have not ventured further than to treat him with indifference."

Not being able to contain myself any longer, I exclaimed: "How can you dare to call a man, like this, your friend? How could you sacrifice to him our dearest cottage? Really, Gontran, I cannot understand you?"

Monsieur de Lancry, recalled to himself by these words, looked at me, apparently confused.

"What did you say, Matilda?"

"I ask you, how you can call Monsieur Lugarto your friend? for I will never consent to see so wicked, so odious, a man. And it is for him, you have left the retreat where we were so happy! Gontran, there is something inexplicable in all this."

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* About two millions five hundred thousand pounds sterling.

M. de Lancry, having overcome his confusion, said to me, smiling, "Listen to a very ambitious comparison, Matilda. Does not the man, who overcomes, and succeeds in taming the tiger and the panther, feel affection for the savage monster he has rendered quiet and obedient? Well: although this poor Lugarto cannot be called a tiger, there is somewhat of this feeling in my friendship for him. Yes: though I have seen him disdainful, malicious, and haughty, with other men; with me he has always been kind, obliging—even devoted. I confess to you, Matilda, I cannot avoid being profoundly sensible to the numerous proofs of affection he has given me; and, as you can conceive, most disinterestedly. Then, think for a moment, how wretched he must be! no one loves him; he has not even a friend. Continually overwhelmed by the fear of being sought after for his fortune, he has chanced to feel that respect and confidence in me, which he has not experienced in others. Tell me, then, Matilda, should not my heart, my vanity—I might almost say my honour—oblige me to receive him kindly?"

I already knew enough of Gontran's expressive countenance, to observe a species of constraint, while he was explaining the cause of his friendship for Lugarto; while, on the contrary, he had given way to a candid bitterness, while describing the odious character of this man.

Without being able to justify my suspicions, I felt there was some mystery in this friendship. Gontran's explanations only half convinced me. However, such is the power, the influence, of love, that, by degrees, while thinking of what Gontran had said to me, I saw a new proof of the affection he inspired, in the extraordinary influence he exercised over M. Lugarto.

Had it been [necessary to excuse myself, in my own eyes, for having been unable to resist the fascinating qualities of Gontran, should I not have argued, that I was compelled to yield this inevitable fatality, since characters the most untractable, the most haughty, had been compelled to acknowledge its influence?

What can I say? My affection was so blind, that M. Lugarto himself became, perhaps, less odious to me, when I reflected he had submitted to the irresistible empire of Gontran.

CHAPTER III.

WEDDING VISITS.

M. DE LANCRY had taken advantage of our absence, to have the hotel Rochegune fitted up; and we found it ready on our arrival. Although a splendid house, I could not refrain from feeling melancholy on entering it. In this residence, everything was, as I may say, new to me; and strangeness has always chilled me.

Ursula and her husband were gone. She was to spend the autumn with us, at Maran. M. Secherin was to bring her there, and return to accompany her home; his business not allowing him to be long absent.

The morning after my arrival, I woke early. I rang for Blondeau, and she came to me. "Well, where are my flowers?" said I, not seeing the basket of jasmine and heliotrope, which she had been accustomed to present to me every morning, since I was betrothed to Gontran.

"There have not been any brought, madam."

"That is impossible."

"I can assure you, madam, that none have been brought. I have just passed through the ante-chamber."

"Again, I tell you, it cannot be possible. Pray, go back again, my good Blondeau, and look for them."

She came back without them.

It was, doubtless, very childish in me; but tears came into my eyes. Blondeau perceived it, and said to me: "We only arrived here yesterday, madam; it must be from forgetfulness."

Alas! yes; it was but forgetfulness; but this forgetfulness hurt me. In the superstition of my heart, I attached an extreme importance, a meaning, to this daily proof of Gontran's attention. It was but a trifle itself; it required him only to give an order, and see that it was executed; and this it was, that made me feel the privation so much more sensibly—it might have been so easily avoided.

Blondeau, seeing I was in tears, endeavoured to console me. She acknowledged to me that the fears she had entertained, as to my happiness, had all been dissipated; that M. de Lancry appeared so kind and so attentive to me, that it was unreasonable in me to affect myself so deeply for so little.

I would never have accused Gontran. I repressed my grief; told Blondeau she was in the right; that I was silly, and would think of it no more.

Then I reflected, that after all, it might be some fault among the servants. I waited for the next morning, with much anguish; no baskets came. To finish the subject of these flowers: from that day they never appeared again.

Nothing in the world would have induced me to speak of them to M. de Lancry. After the grief forgetfulness occasions, there can be nothing more painful, more humiliating to the heart, than to complain of such forgetfulness.

Although I suffered long and cruelly from a puerility in appearance so trifling, I excused Gontran at the expense of my own susceptibility, which I endeavoured to persuade myself was exaggerated and unreasonable. I thanked him for having, at least, placed some interval between his attentions and his neglect.

How many men are there who, the very day after marriage, replace the thousand attentions and assiduities they had been wont to offer, by a sudden and unthinking carelessness of manner.

Senseless beings! in order to escape some sweet constraint—to live, as they are pleased to call it, with freedom, they know not of what ravishing delights they debar themselves for ever! They do not comprehend that marriage soon becomes a gross monotonous existence, often intolerable, from the discontinuance of those exquisite attentions. They cannot comprehend, that on attentions, so frivolous in appearance, often depend the happiness and tranquillity of their lives.

They cannot feel the heart-breaking humiliation which they inflict upon a woman, the first time they compel her to ask herself, whether it is her new title of wife which has caused this abrupt cessation of attentions. They cannot feel the generous resignation with which a wife is gifted, and which teaches her not to draw fatal comparisons between the respectful attentions of people who are nothing to her, and the neglect of him who ought to be all in all to her.

Alas! I know that women, who feel so keenly these slight shades of difference, are reproached with attaching an overstrained and ridiculous importance to trivialities, to nothings; and still these nothings suffice almost always to the happiness of women. For these nothings they will blindly devote themselves with pride, with joy. For these nothings they will always overlook privations, sorrows, and even great misfortunes, because these nothings prove that they are tenderly beloved; what wounds them most, and always incurably, is indifference and disdain.

And further; when men, in their glorious self-sufficiency, treat as childishness, that which is all to us—is it generous in them? they so wise, so strong, so powerful, to refuse us those attentions which would cost them so little, and which would be to us at least a pretext for loving them to adoration?

This long digression is perhaps necessary, to make you understand how much I must have suffered from the forgetfulness of Gontran. It was the first sorrow he had caused me.

This day, so unhappy at its commencement, was destined to be painful to me.

After breakfast, M. de Lancry showed me the list of visits which he had drawn up, and said, "It would have been useless to put down the name of Mademoiselle de Maran, for we, of course, must commence our round by calling upon her."

I looked at M. de Lancry with amazement. "My aunt? you surely cannot think of it, my dear friend!"

"Why not?"

"I go to see her—I!"

"But really, Matilda, I do not understand you."

"You do not understand me—ah! Gontran!"

"I now comprehend you. You are still thinking of that stupid calumny against your mother? but I thought we had agreed that it was mere madness. We must take people as we find them. Rather than not calumniate some one, your aunt would speak ill of herself. It is a moral infirmity, which we ought to pity as much as we do a physical one. You look at me as if you were astounded; though nothing can be plainer. Would you attach the slightest importance to the ravings of a madman? you would not I am sure. Well, then, do as I do—forget the foolish words dictated by the phrenzy of hatred: the sacred memory of your mother is not to be injured by such calumnies."

I felt heart-broken. At first, I had not strength to utter a single word; and then, bursting into tears, which since the morning I had restrained, I exclaimed, "Never! never shall my foot cross the threshhold of Mademoiselle de Maran's door! I entreat you, do not insist upon it. I could not do it."

"Calm yourself, Matilda—calm yourself; believe that I would not ask anything but what is right, but what is necessary. I do not require that you should often see your aunt, but I wish you to see her now and then."

"No! I tell you the sight of that woman would kill me—she horrifies me!"

"These are exaggerations, my dear Matilda. Reflect well upon this: the world would not be able to comprehend your sudden rupture with a relation, who brought you up, and who had much to do with our marriage—you can comprehend this, Matilda? People will make comments upon it; all sorts of improbable stories will be told; they will question your aunt; and she, being offended at this want of attention on your part, will most probably explain it in her own way. You and I and M. de Mortagne," added Gontran, pronouncing the last name after some effort, "only heard the mad and wicked words of Mademoiselle de Maran: take care not to exasperate her; she might repeat to others what would otherwise remain a secret confided to us only; and, notwithstanding her incorruptible purity, destroy the memory of your mother."

"And it is you—you, Gontran—who propose this to me? What signifies the world to me? or what care I for the abominable atrocities of Mademoiselle de Maran? Do you believe, that should I be asked, I would conceal the reasons which have made me break off all intercourse with her, and for ever? No! no! the severest vengeance which can fall on a calumniator, is to proclaim her calumnies, and thus crush them under their own shame! Ah! do not fear, Gontran; the sacred memory of my mother can brave the vile attacks of Mademoiselle de Maran. Every well-thinking person will approve me, when they know why I will not visit that horrid woman."

"Matilda, you speak as a tender and devoted child; this is natural; but you do not know the world. Believe me, the memory of your mother is as sacred to me as it can be to you; it is to preserve it pure from every stain, that, in spite of your repugnance I must absolutely insist on your paying some few visits to Mademoiselle de Maran. Again, I tell you, it is necessary, indispensable—you understand me?"

While pronouncing these words, the voice of M. de Lancry, which till then was soft and affectionate, took a more firm expression: he slightly contracted his eye-brows. I feared that I had hurt him by my resistance; I was much afflicted at it; but what he had asked me to do, and perhaps with reason, appeared to me beyond my strength. "Pardon, pardon, my dear friend—pity my weakness—I cannot do it. I repeat to you, nothing in the world can induce me to see that woman again. In the name of our love, Gontran, do not exact this of me. I cannot do it."

"I assure you, Matilda, that you have strength to do it. It is a sacrifice—a great sacrifice—still I must require it of you."

"Gontran, for pity's sake!"

"I tell you it is necessary, and you must do it."

"Oh, Heaven! you know not what it is that——"

M. de Lancry interrupted me with violence, restrained up to that moment: and stamping with his foot, exclaimed, "I know well what it is to have endured the disgraceful reproaches, the insolent bravadoes, of Monsieur de Mortagne! I know what it is to have been almost insulted in the presence of your family and my own! I know what it is to have retained my hate and my desire for vengeance! I know, moreover, what it is not to have forced this man to give me satisfaction—and this out of regard for you. Well! it is because I know how much all this has cost me, that in return I ask you to do that, which I consider your rigorous duty. Once for all, madam, you will always find me as blindly devoted to your desires, when not injurious to you, as you will find me intractable, when you require me to yield to a caprice."

"A caprice! Gontran. Good heaven! a caprice!"

"The exaggeration of a very commendable sentiment prevent you from judging this question sanely."

"But my heart revolts against it, in spite of myself; what can I do?"

"Since neither reason nor entreaty can influence you," exclaimed M. de Lancry, angrily, "I declare, that if you do not consent to accompany me to Mademoiselle de Maran's, I will find out the residence of M. de Mortagne. I know his courage; I know that, notwithstanding his resolution not to fight, there are insults which he would not bear: and if you force me to it by your refusal, I——"

"Ah! this is too dreadful, Gontran. I will go with you to Mademoiselle de Maran," said I, weeping, taking my husband's hand between both mine, almost with terror, and as if about to save him from great peril.

Some one knocked at the door of the room where we were sitting. I retired, wiping the tears from my eyes, into my bed-room.

I heard a servant announce to my husband that the Count de Lugarto was waiting for him, in his own room.

Gontran came into my room, spoke to me with tenderness, and told me to let him know when he could bring M. Lugarto, whom he wished to present to me.

"But I am in tears," said I; "pray adjourn this visit."

"Quick, quick," said he, with apparent gaiety; "dry those beautiful eyes, or I will immediately fetch my tamed tiger. While you are recovering yourself, I will allow him to admire our house, and will send presently to know if you can receive us."

CHAPTER IV.

M. LUGARTO.

I WIPED away my tears and waited for this irksome presentation. I did not feel a moment's bitterness against Gontran. I thought he looked at the question in his point of view, and I in mine—I must be in the wrong, for he had said so. I therefore ought to submit to his judgment.

The very idea of a meeting between M. de Mortagne and M. de Lancry, froze me with horror. At that time, as afterward, when thinking of the cruel sacrifice I was about to make to the will of Gontran, and of what I was about to suffer from the presence of Mademoiselle de Maran, I consoled myself with the reflection, that my resignation would please my husband. From that time I understood that great—that terrible truth, so true is it that it appears a paradox: "When a woman loves passionately, the most unjust orders, the most barbarous treatment, far from diminishing her affection, heighten it still more; she piously kisses the hand that strikes her, as martyrs, in their painful ecstasies, thank the Lord for the torments they endure."

A servant came from M. de Lancry, to ask if I could receive him with M. Lugarto. I requested that they would come to my apartment. A few minutes afterward, Gontran and his friend entered the room. The description my husband had given me of him was perfectly striking. M. Lugarto's figure was slender, and he was dressed with more fashion than taste. In his features, although agreeable, remained distinctly visible the primitive type of his race; his nose was flattened, his complexion pale and yellow; his eyes were of a glassy blue, and his hair brown. In his sickly-looking face there was an expression of self-sufficiency, cunning, and malignity, which, from the first moment, revolted me.

"My dear friend, permit me to present to you M. Lugarto, my best friend."

I bowed without being able to utter a word.

"Lancry truly told me, you were very charming; but I see that his eulogiums are far below the truth," said M. Lugarto to me, with a sort of protecting and familiar ease.

I did not answer him. Gontran gave me an impatient look, and hastened to say, smiling at his friend:

"I, who do not possess the modesty of Madame de Lancry—I, who glory in her successes as if they were my own, I acknowledge to you, my dear Lugarto, that I feel sensibly your kind opinion."

"And you have reason to do so, for you know I am not generally enthusiastic. Therefore, if I swear to you that nothing can be more enchanting than madam, it must be the truth. But I will tell you, and with the same frankness, that it is very dangerous for your friends to see such a treasure."

"Ah! my dear Lugarto, pray take care, now you are falling into exaggerations; you had begun so well," said Gontran, much embarrassed by my silence.

I was in positive torments; however, making an effort to appear calm, I said, with great coldness:

"You have returned from London, sir."

"Yes madam, I went to be present at the spring races."

"You see before you, my dear friend, one of the habitual winners at Epsom, and of the Derby; Lugarto's race-horses are celebrated throughout England," said Gontran, hastening to keep up the conversation. "Shall you not have some of them brought here for the races in the Bois de Boulogne, and in the Champ de mars?"

"Bah! your French horses are not worth the trouble of putting one's self out of the way to beat them! and then, you can't bet high enough!" said M. Lugarto, disdainfully. He then turned to me, saying, "The day after to-morrow, there will be a 'matinée dansante' at the English embassy. Go to it, all Paris will be there; it will be charming, particularly should you be there."

"I do not know, sir, whether M. de Lancry intends going."

"You must be a tyrant, my dear friend, if your wife awaits your orders to know where she is to go;" and then turning to me, M. Lugarto added, "Believe me, with regard to pleasures, act always after your own will, and put our de Lancry here at once in the right way. There is nothing more disagreeable than these deuced husbands, when once they are allowed to acquire bad habits."

I looked at Gontran, and I replied to these impertinent vulgarities, uttered with the most ridiculous assurance, by these words:

"Is the museum open yet, sir?" that I might make M. Lugarto feel, by this sudden change of subject, that I found his pleasantries in bad taste.

M. Lugarto being, doubtless, accustomed to a different reception, appeared piqued at it: he said to Gontran—

"How is this, my dear friend? Madame de Lancry and I are playing at cross purposes. I am talking to her of the tyranny of husbands, and she replies by asking me a question about the museum!"

"To say the truth, my dear Lugarto, you are rather embarrassing; your conversation dazzles at first a little. You were born an age too late; you should have been born under the regency. But still, my dear," said Gontran to me, "you must not judge Lugarto by his wild words, he is of greater value than they are; but it is understood that he may say just what he pleases, he has been so much spoiled. Come, come; I will undertake to make peace between you and Madame de Lancry."

"I am sorry to have displeased you by my poor jokes," rejoined M. Lugarto, with a constrained smile, but without calling me *madam;* a familiarity which appeared habitual to him, and which I thought extremely ill-mannered. I was about to say something very hard to him, but I restrained myself, and replied, "It only appeared to me, sir, that you were rather in haste to bring me into the intimacy, which attaches you to M. de Lancry."

"It is, d'ye see, that we are always in haste to enjoy advantages we ardently desire; and I hope you will excuse me, in favour of the motive," said M. Lugarto, smiling convulsively; and then he gave me a cold and sullen look, which almost frightened me. My instinct told me that I had, in a few short minutes, made an enemy.

My husband appeared much mortified: wishing once more to renew the conversation, which I had let drop, expressly for the purpose of cutting short an interview, which had become insupportable, Gontran said to M. Lugarto, whose impertinent assurance was in no wise abashed, "Have you seen the conservatory, into which Madame de Lancry's apartment opens. You, who are so great an admirer of flowers, must give us your advice. Will you come with us, Matilda?"

I was about to refuse; but I obeyed an imperious sign given me by Gontran. I accompanied him into the parlour, which communicated with the conservatory.

"It is horribly arranged," said M. Lugarto, after having examined it. "Your architect does not understand it. It is built over an arch; the cold passing under it, you can never have a proper temperature. But this is like the French; they wish to ape opulence, and they are reduced to economical luxury."

The blood rose to M. de Lancry's forehead; but he controlled his feelings, and replied, "You are severe upon M. de Rochegune, the former proprietor of this house, my dear Lugarto; for we found this conservatory already built."

"Rochegune? Rochegune?" said M. Lugarto; "I know him well. I met him at Naples, I was then the lover of the Countess Bradini. Rochegune took her away from me; but he did not long enjoy his triumph, for by means of certain forged letters—and you know I can counterfeit writing marvellously well—the husband——"

"My dear friend," said I to M. de Lancry, interrupting M. Lugarto, whose barefaced wickedness revolted me, "I find it very hot here—shall we return to the drawing-room?"

"Pardon me," said M. de Lugarto; "I should like to take the measure of this hot-house with my cane. I wish to send you some magnificent plants from the Brazils, and some other rare plants, which I have sent for to Holland. I must see if they will stand here?"

"I am much obliged to you, sir; the flowers which ornament this conservatory, are quite sufficient for me."

"But these flowers are hideous; also, the taste of M. de Rochegune: if one has these things, they ought to be complete. Look ye, Lancry, for example: I wanted to send to Holland this winter, to fetch away some equinoctial plants—how did I set about it? I had an immense wagon constructed, covered with glass, and arranged as a hot-house, with a small steam-stove—the whole was so perfectly well got up, that although this wagon came post from the Hague, not one of the panes of glass which covered it were broken. Two gardeners attended this wandering conservatory, in another carriage. It all arrived here as by enchantment."

"The idea, in fact, was very ingenious," said M. de Lancry, "and shows you to have much invention, Lugarto!"

"What would you have? It is not enough to have money, one must have the wish to employ it properly. There are so many people who do not know how to spend well the fortune which they have not."

"Spend what they have not! you are speaking in enigmas, my dear Lugarto."

"Ah! you think so, my dear Lancry?"

Gontran and his friend appeared to me to exchange strange looks, during a silence of some seconds.

My husband was the first to break it, and said, smiling, but with an embarrassed air, "I understand you—in that sense you are right; but if you please, we will return to the drawing-room; I really fear the heat may be injurious to Madame de Lancry."

M. de Lugarto, having measured the height of the walls, said: "My plants will stand here very well. I will add to them some rare West Indian flowers, with baskets to suspend them in—and then you will, at all events, have a hot-house suitably supplied. 'Tis true, it is so badly constructed, that all will perish in it; but I shall be delighted at that, for it will give me the opportunity of renewing your plants so much the more frequently!"

We returned to the drawing-room. I thought this interminable visit ended, but no such thing. M. de Lancry pointed out to M. Lugarto a tolerably fine view of Venice, by a modern painter, saying, "You are a connoisseur; what do you think of that?"

"It is not bad. Did you pay much for it?"

"No. This painting was included in the sale of the hotel."

"'Tis the best way to purchase pictures; for these riff-raff painters always make you pay double the value of them, when you order them, and they know you are rich. When I was *young*, I was fool enough to pay them in advance; and in consequence, it often happened, I could hardly get my picture from them: and then what sort of picture! The money, once expended, they cared for nothing else. But now, no picture, no money—I only pay them when I am satisfied. If not, I make them retouch it, paint it over and over, until it pleases me—at all events, this way, I am no longer robbed."

This brutal insolence disgusted me. I could not help saying, "Ah! sir, you have revealed to me one of the painful indignities which genius is subjected to, and which I had not thought of—and you find artists?"

"Do I not find them? and some of the most celebrated. They overwhelm me with their insipidities, when I go to their *studios;* they ask my opinion even upon pictures they are not painting for me, and they pretend to listen to me, to make their court to me. In truth, you can get any thing from this race for a few notes of a thousand francs each. Their tribe is only to be managed with money."

I could not contain myself any longer. I recollected what Gontran had told me, as to the sensitiveness of M. Lugarto with regard to his birth, and his own want of personal merit; and I said to M. de Lancry, "Dear me! what M. Lugarto has just mentioned, reminds me of a very touching story of a *great artist* and a *great nobleman*, which the Duke de Versac, your uncle, several times related to me. It was of Greuse and the Duke de Penthievre; did he never tell you of it?"

"No; at all events, I do not recollect it," replied M. de Lancry.

"Tell us the story then. I have some of Greuse's paintings. It will interest me," said M. Lugarto.

"This is what your uncle told me," said I, addressing myself to Gontran; "the Duke de Penthievre was a passionate admirer of the arts; he encouraged them, as a nobleman who could fully comprehend, that high birth illustrated by ancient dignities, and genius, are allied; insomuch that they are two magnificent advantages, which history or Heaven alone can give; and which all the treasures of the world cannot purchase or replace." I looked at M. Lugarto; he was reddening with spite. "The Duke de Penthievre entertained the most touching friendship toward Greuse. You well know, that the inexhaustible goodness of that excellent prince was equalled only by the superiority of his understanding; when he went to see the first pictures Greuse had painted for him, and which he remunerated with almost royal liberality, he said to the great painter, with that charm which appertains only to the high aristocracy, 'My dear Greuse, I find your paintings admirable; but I must beg a favour of you.'

"'Monseigneur, I am at your orders.'

"'Well!' said the prince, with a sort of timid hesitation, as though he asked a boon, 'well! I wish that you would write in your own hand, at the bottom of these paintings, GIVEN by Greuse to his FRIEND the Duke de Penthievre. Posterity will know that I have been the friend of a great painter.'

"Acknowledge," said I to Gontran, remarking with joy that my blow had taken effect, and that M. Lugarto could not conceal his vexation, "acknowledge that nothing could be more delicate, more charming than the conduct of the prince."

"Yes, certainly, it is charming," said M. de Lancry, much embarrassed; and making a sign to me to look at Lugarto, who, with eyes cast down, was biting the head of his cane.

Notwithstanding my desire to please Gontran, I continued: "Does not this, my dear Gontran, exalt at the same time, the great artist capable of inspiring such a sentiment, and the truly great nobleman, who was thus capable of feeling and expressing such friendship?"

Gontran endeavored to interrupt me, by several signs; but I had been too much disgusted by M. de Lugarto, to be able to resist the pleasure of mortifying him. I had succeeded, I saw, by his pallid face, and by another look of hatred which he suddenly gave me.

Nevertheless, M. de Lugarto was not long disconcerted; he again addressed me, with imperturbable assurance. "I did not know that story of the Duke de Penthievre," said he; "it is a very pretty one, but it does not convert me. I prefer rather not to pass for a simpleton, in the opinion of artists, and not to take the trouble of being over-delicate with them. But now I think of it, I have a view of Naples, by Bonnington, which will be a beautiful *pendant* to your view of Venice. I will send it to you with the flowers I promised your wife."

"My dear Lugarto, I beg you will not—"

"What nonsense: to be on ceremony, between friends, for a miserable picture—what is the use of it?"

"Well! I am of your opinion—we should not make such a fuss about a picture. Allow me, then, to send you my view of Venice, which will be a *pendant* to your view of Naples."

"Faith, my dear friend, I am caught in my own net. I accept it with so much more pleasure, as it comes from the apartment of Madame de Lancry. Adieu till this evening. My dear friend, I shall see you a moment at the club, shall I not?"

"I don't know; I have several visits to pay, with Madame de Lancry."

"Yes, yes—I shall see you there. I am sure I shall—you know for what?"

"Oh, yes; I had forgotten, you are right. Therefore, this evening rather late," replied M. de Lancry, rather embarrassed.

"Without malice," said M. Lugarto to me, holding out his hand.

Although this English custom was not then much in use, in good society, it shocked me less than the audacity of M. Lugarto. Instead of taking his proffered hand, I replied to him by a very formal courtesy.

"Decidedly: you will not, then, make peace? Well! my dear de Lancry, your wife has given me a declaration of war," continued Lugarto. "Well! she is in the wrong; for she will end by acknowledging that I am better than my reputation. It is a challenge; take care of yourself, my dear friend, for I may be compelled to pay my court to your wife, to cure her prejudices. You see, I do not intend to act treacherously—I give you fair warning."

"You will always be the maddest fellow of my acquaintance," said Gontran to him, taking him by the arm and leading him away.

I was more astonished by the patience of Gontran, than by the insolence of this man. I was endeavouring to imagine what could be the secret of the influence he exercised over Gontran, when the latter returned. His handsome features were, for the first time that I had witnessed, disfigured by an expression of anger.

"Good Heavens! madam," exclaimed he, shutting the door with violence. "I have never before seen you exercise that waywardness of will of which I had heard something. But, it appears to me, that my best friend ought not to have been selected as your victim. Had every word you uttered been calculated with the greatest malice, and for a length of time, you could not more cruelly have wounded him. I told you yesterday, in confidence, that Lugarto bitterly regretted that he was not born noble, and that his only merit is the millions he possesses; and you discuss complacently, and at length, the advantages of the aristocracy of birth and talents. Notwithstanding his laughing, he has gone away completely furious. I know him well; he is furious, I tell you!"

"Is it possible, Gontran, that you defend him? Can you reproach me for having made this man feel how much his manner has disgusted me?"

"I had forewarned you, madam, that his manners were, perhaps, a little too familiar, and that you would oblige me by excusing them, in favour of the friendship which attaches him to me. I see, with pain, that, in spite of my request, you have done all you could to irritate him; for I repeat it again, he is much irritated."

"Pray, let me ask you, of what consequence to you can be the anger of M. de Lugarto?"

"It is of consequence that I should not alienate a friend, an intimate friend, whom I like—to whom I am sincerely attached. You hear me, madam!"

"You like this man, you say, Gontran. I would wish to believe you, but I cannot. There is no relation between the nobleness of your sentiments and the coarseness of M. de Lugarto. And again, I know not how it is, but when you speak of the friendship you feel for him, your features are contracted, your voice is sharp, and one would say that you were governed by a very different feeling."

These words, uttered almost at random, seemed to produce a terrible effect on M. de Lancry. He stamped with violence; and cried out—his lips trembling with anger—"What do you mean by that, madam? What do you mean by that?"

My heart sank within me. I was terrified. I burst into tears, and said to Gontran, "Pardon! my dear friend, pardon! I did not mean to say anything to wound your feelings, only I could not comprehend them."

"There is no question as to your comprehending; the question is, to obey me without interpreting my words—without scrutinizing my secret sentiments. If I tell you that M. Lugarto is my friend—if I ask you to treat him as such, you ought to believe me and obey me, without reasoning or reflecting."

"Do not be angry, Gontran. I will obey you, only let me tell you that it costs me dearly. In this one day, you have asked of me two very cruel sacrifices—to visit Mademoiselle de Maran, and to admit into our intimacy a man, whose character and manners must inspire aversion to all who do not, like you, excuse M. Lugarto from indulgent friendship. Again, my dear Gontran, do not believe that because the sacrifice I make is painful, I will not redeem my promise. The greater the proof you may require of my devotion to you—the more painful they are to me—the more they will attest the ardour of my love. Pardon me, then, dear Gontran, the hesitation I have evinced. Now I will do all you may require of me on this subject."

M. de Lancry's features had gradually recovered their expression of habitual sweetness—only he seemed oppressed. He took my hand, and said to me, with kindness,

"It is now my turn, Matilda, to ask your pardon for my violence. But, once, for all, believe that I ask nothing which is not indispensable to your happiness—I dare not say to mine."

"Ah! my dear friend, that is the only reason that you need mention; it would always be sufficient to decide me."

They came to announce to Gontran that the carriage was ready. We set out to pay a visit to Mademoiselle de Maran.

CHAPTER V.

THE PRINCESS KSERNIKA.

M. de Lancry said not a single word to me on our way to Mademoiselle de Maran's: he seemed passive and dejected. As soon as the carriage stopped at the door, my heart failed me; and I implored Gontran, at least, to delay the visit. He replied to me, by an impatient gesture. I observed several carriages in the court of the hotel; I was almost satisfied; it seemed to me, that a first interview with my aunt would thus be rendered less painful. What was my surprise on entering the saloon, to find again M. Lugarto! I saw, also, the Princess Ksernika, who had been at the representation of *The Siege of Corinth*, at the time I accompanied Mademoiselle de Maran to the opera, in the chamberlain's box.

"Good morning, at last, my dear child," said my aunt, in the most affectionate way in the world, as she rose to embrace me.

I shuddered: I was upon the point of repulsing her. At a look from Gontran, I resigned myself.

"She is more beautiful than ever," said Mademoiselle de Maran, examining me with care. "'Tis simple enough—happiness is so becoming! And Gontran knows better than any one, how to be prodigal in such adornment. Allow me, my dear princess," continued she, addressing Madame de Ksernika, "to present to you Madame de Lancry, my niece, my adopted daughter." The princess rose and said to me, with much grace: "We were beginning, madam, to consider M. de Lancry very selfish; but he has doubtless, only been blamed so much, because he was envied more———"

I saluted Madame de Ksernika, and seated myself beside her. She was a very handsome woman; fair, tall and slender, with a charming air and figure: her features, which were extremely regular, wore, almost always, an expression of haughtiness, petulance or lassitude; ordinarily, she half-closed her large, blue, languid eyes. This habit, united with a somewhat imperious carriage of the head, gave her rather a disdainful than a really dignified air. Polish by birth, she spoke our language without the slightest accent, but with an almost Asiatic kind of indolence and languor; although she was superbly elegant she was still more exquisite in her attire than in her person. I had hardly seated myself beside the princess, when M. Lugarto took a chair behind me, and said to me, familiarly:

"Well—are you still angry with me? You are really for war?" And then addressing Madame de Ksernika, he added, with a glance at me:

"Princess, pray tell her that I improve upon acquaintance; and that 'tis better to have me for a friend than a foe."

I reddened with vexation. I did not dare, for fear of displeasing Gontran, to reply with severity; I accordingly kept silence. The princess replied, in her languid voice, looking haughtily over her shoulder at M. Lugarto:

"You? It would be very indifferent to me, whether you were friend or foe; for I should no more trust in your friendship, than I should fear your enmity."

"Come, come, princess; you are unjust."

"No! you know that I do not spoil you! not I. I am, perhaps, the only person who tells you the truth about yourself. You ought to be much obliged to me; for I do not take the trouble to tell it to everybody. Don't you think, madam," continued the princess, addressing herself to me, "that one must have great consideration for people to be willing to tell them what the rest of the world are afraid to tell them?"

"As to that," I replied, "it seems to me that esteem and contempt are expressed in the same way.

"Interpret that for us," said M. de Lugarto.

"Well—I believe, sir, that one may express the severest truths, without taking the least account of the person whom one addresses."

"Is that intended for me?" rejoined M. de Lugarto, with his imperturbable assurance.

"You deserve to be answered yes," said the princess. "Do you know, that I cannot comprehend why men and women all tolerate your audacious and familiar airs?"

"That is my secret, and you shall not know it."

"You mean to make me believe in some power that is—supernatural, do you not?"

"Perhaps."

"You are mad!"

"Am I? Very well. Do you wish me to make you blush, even to the white of your eyes, and then grow paler again than you would wish?"

"That is very stale," replied the princess indolently. "You are going to propose to magnetise me? And you do not even know, perhaps, what magnetism is; for you are no philosopher, science not being purchasable with money."

M. Lugarto smiled for some moments with a malicious and convulsive smile, that was peculiar to him. I read, in his dull eyes, an expression of malignant fury; he said slowly, as he fastened a deliberate look upon the princess. "I am as ignorant as a savage, 'tis true; but there are things which nobody in the world knows but myself, because a great deal of money is required to buy the knowledge."

"Indeed?" said the princess, disdainfully.

"Ay, indeed! and the most entertaining part of it is, that my knowledge has the air of being nothing; but, like all skilful people, I do much with little. Thus, for example, you have no idea, I dare say, of the results I obtain, with a date—the name of a street—and a number."

I looked accidentally at the princess: her face was crimson.

"Thus the 12th December, *rue de l'Ouest*, No. 17, for example. That does not seem to signify anything," continued M. Lugarto; "and yet, nothing more is needed to make your cheek pale again, now that you have been blushing, as I predicted." Then he continued, so as to be heard only by her and me. "Pray, take care, princess, you are observed; do not gaze at me with that fixed and astonished look—'tis very unbecoming. Your eyes are much finer when they are half-closed," added he, with a cruel irony.

Madame de Ksernika was, indeed, extremely pale. She seemed fascinated by the revelation which M. Lugarto had just been making to her. At this moment Mademoiselle de Maran was conversing in an under tone with M. de Lancry. Observing the agitation of Madame de Ksernika, she said, "Are you unwell, my dear princess?"

"Yes, madam. I have had a shocking head-ache all day," said the poor woman, in a faltering voice, and striving in vain to collect herself.

"You see, 'tis much better to have me for a friend than an enemy," said M. Lugarto to me in a low voice. Two ladies were just entering; the princess was unable to retire, and thus more easily to conceal her agitation. I remained almost terrified at the mysterious power of M. Lugarto. Gontran made me a sign, showing me an empty chair near Mademoiselle de Maran; I seated myself upon it. My aunt said to me in a low voice. "Do you believe that I put any faith in the head-ache of this fair princess *Micomicon!* I will wager that this white negro," continued she, glancing at M. Lugarto, "has been saying something infamous to her—which, however, she well deserves; for although her husband beats her to plaster, and has already broken her arm, he is very far from being even with her—she owes him at least her other arm and both her legs, if he is disposed to make her pay a limb for each lover. But no matter, the impudence of this M. Lugarto is revolting to me. I have only consented to receive the arch milionaire, in order to have the satisfaction of severely chastizing him."

Notwithstanding the aversion with which Mademoiselle de Maran inspired me, I could not help feeling obliged to her for this resolution. The two ladies who had first arrived, conversed a little with Mademoiselle de Maran, Gontran, and M. Lugarto.

"Pray tell me, M. Lugarto," cried Mademoiselle de Maran, suddenly, without suspending her knitting, in the midst of one of those pauses which so often occur in conversation, "was that your carriage in which I met you the other day?"

"Why do you ask that question?" said M. Lugarto negligently.

Mademoiselle de Maran, instead of replying to this question, asked another. She had always told me, that nothing was more impertinent and more disdainful than such a proceeding. "How happened there to be arms upon the panels, then, if it is yours?"

"They are mine, madam," said M. Lugarto, colouring with vexation; for his imperturbable audacity was at fault, when his ridiculous pretensions to nobility were attacked.

"Did you pay a very high price for those arms?" said Mademoiselle de Maran.

There was, for a moment, a very embarrassing silence. M. Lugarto compressed his lips, and scowled. I looked at Gontran. He could not help smiling bitterly at first; then, upon receiving a look from M. Lugarto, at once angry and imploring, he said eagerly to Mademoiselle de Maran: "Apropos of arms, madam; would you have the kindness to lend me your d'Hozier? I have some researches to make upon one of our collateral branches; but now I think of it, could not you——"

"Be quiet with your collateral branches," replied Mademoiselle de Maran; "you are interrupting an interesting conversation. Indeed, M. Lugarto, you have been abominably imposed on if you have paid dearly for those arms. I will lay a wager that it is a composition of your coachmaker's. But, permit me to tell you, it has not common sense. It is always a mistake to apply to that sort of people for an escutcheon. If you, too, choose to indulge in such a fancy, you should address yourself to a better quarter."

"But, madam," said M. Lugarto, turning pale with repressed rage—

"But, sir, I repeat that your coachmaker or his painter, are blockheads. Who ever heard, in heraldry, of charging metal upon metal. Believe me, my dear sir, they have been making game of you most outrageously, with their golden stars upon a field argent; they invented that probably because it looked richer, and recalled ingeniously your heaps of piastres and doubloons; to say nothing of the two lions rampant, with which the idiots have bedizened your shield. Do you know that they would produce a superb effect, those lions rampant of yours, if they did not inconveniently happen to belong to the royal house of Aragon?"

"But, madam, it is not I who invented these arms. They are those of my family," said M. Lugarto, rising impatiently, and directing a furious glance at Gontran. The latter attempted in vain to interfere in the conversation; Mademoiselle de Maran did not abandon her prey so easily.

"Ah! Heavens! Heavens! Really, they are then the arms of your family;" cried my aunt, taking off her spectacles, and clasping her hands with apparent good-nature. "Why did not you tell me so at once? After all, there is nothing in it that is not perfectly natural. It is probable, you see, that a Lugarto, for some fine deed of arms against the Moors of Spain, may have obtained from a king of Aragon the signal favour of wearing the lions rampant in his armorial bearings, just as our monarchs have granted the lilies to certain houses of France. 'Tis the same with your golden stars in a field argent; that is undoubtedly some glorious heraldric mystery which is buried in your family achieves. And I was laughing at it! Why, now, I really admire your golden stars on their silver field! It is perhaps in its way as unique and peculiar a piece of blazonry as the cross of Lorraine, the crequier of Cregui, the mascle of Rohan, or the alerion of Montmorency. The origin of your golden stars upon a silver field must be uncommonly curious! Tell us all about it, my dear sir."

"Madam, if this be raillery, I think it really is in bad taste," said M. Lugarto, endeavouring to recover his coolness.

"Not at all, my dear sir, I was never more serious in my life; for I remember that you are originally from Brazil—that Brazil belongs to Portugal—Portugal did belong to Spain; you see, that as we ascend we draw near to the kings of Aragon. But—ah! indeed, there is one trifling circumstance which arrests my progress toward the past.

"*Good, good!* madam, do not trouble yourself with it; I thank you for all your solicitude," cried M. Lugarto.

Mademoiselle de Maran did not seem to have heard him, and continued: "Yes, there is but this one little difficulty—'tis said that your respected grandfather was something like a negro slave, or——"

"Madam, you are abusing——"

"'Tis that," continued Mademoiselle de Maran, still occupied with her knitting, "which prevents me from representing to myself, your honoured grandfather with a count's coronet upon his head. Attired in this way, he would be, as like as one drop of water to another, to those dreadful savages of Bongainville, who gravely wear the cross of Saint Louis in their noses. Don't you think so?"

I shuddered at the almost ferocious expression which the physiognomy of M. Lugarto assumed for a moment; this expression struck me the more, as, at the same instant, he burst into a forced and nervous fit of laughter.

"Is not that, really, a droll comparison which I have just invented?" said Mademoiselle de Maran, addressing M. Lugarto.

"Very droll, madam, very droll—but confess that I have a well-balanced character."

"To be sure! the best in the world; and I am very sure that you will not bear me the least malice. And, after all, you are right; nothing can be more innocent than my jests."

"I bear malice!" said M. Lugarto. "Ah! could you believe it? Stay, I will take Gontran away with me, to laugh quite at our ease at my golden stars in their field argent."

"While you are about it, laugh at the same time at your lions rampant. That is the most preposterous part of your blazonry. But this is all nonsense," continued she; "keep your arms, my dear sir, keep your arms; they throw dust in the eyes of the passers-by. 'Tis all that is needed for vulgar eyes; for your innocent pretensions to nobility never get further than *our* ante-chambers. As for us, you have something better, upon my word, than golden stars upon a silver field, to dazzle, or rather to charm us; you unite all kinds of qualities of head and heart—all kinds of immense acquirements, and modest merits—so that if you were not worth millions, you would be nevertheless an uncommonly interesting man, and highly valued—I give you my word for it."

"I feel the full value of your praise, madam, and shall endeavour to requite you; and to extend, if I can, my gratitude to the persons of your family and to those who interest you," replied M. Lugarto, with bitterness, and with a furious glance at me.

"And I shall surely depend upon it, for I am not selfish," replied Mademoiselle de Maran, with a singular smile.

"Are you coming, Lancry?" said M. Lugarto to my husband.

"I shall see you at club this evening, as we agreed," replied Gontran, embarrassed.

"Yes; but I had forgotten one thing—our man from London expects us at three o'clock."

At these words, M. de Lancry contracted his brows, rose, and said to Mademoiselle de Maran, "Madam, I leave Matilda with you; M. Lugarto reminds me of an engagement which I had forgotten——"

I cast an imploring look toward Gontran; he avoided it. "Lugarto will take me with him," added he; "keep the carriage—I shall see you again at dinner."

The two ladies, who had been mute spectators of this scene between Mademoiselle de Maran and M. Lugarto, took their departure a few minutes after. I remained alone with Mademoiselle de Maran.

CHAPTER VI.

MADEMOISELLE DE MARAN.

My long, and painfully restrained, indignation broke forth at last against this woman, who had dared to calumniate my mother in so atrocious a manner.

"There is a lesson which that impertinent fellow will not forget soon," said Mademoiselle de Maran. "He will be the more furious, because I gave him—very designedly too—the lesson before the two Countesses d'Aubeterre, who have the most malicious tongues I know. This evening, all Paris will know the story of the golden stars on the field argent."

"Madam," said I to Mademoiselle de Maran, "you ought to be astonished at seeing me in your house!"

"Astonished! and why so, my dear?"

This excess of audacity increased my indignation.

"Listen to me, madam: nothing in the world, but the will of Monsieur de Lancry, could have compelled me to see you again, after the abominable language that you have dared to use concerning my mother. Just now, I was frightened at finding myself alone with you: now I regret it the less, since I can express all the horror with which you inspire me."

"Matilda! you forget——"

"Madam, I remember your cruelties! I remember the sorrows in which you steeped my childhood and youth! Still, I might have pardoned you, in consideration of the happiness I have enjoyed since my marriage—a happiness to which you contributed, without doubt, involuntarily."

"Involuntarily? No! my dear; I knew very well what I was doing: 't is exactly for this, that your ingratitude——"

"My ingratitude! This raillery is cruel, madam."

"Yes, yes—your ingratitude!" cried Mademoiselle de Maran, angrily interrupting me; "yes, you are ungrateful, not to have appreciated what I did for you—in preventing your husband, and that miserable Monsieur de Mortagne, from cutting each other's throats!"

"Was it necessary, madam, to have recourse to a shocking calumny, to prevent this misfortune? Besides, Gontran had promised me——"

"A fine promise—which he would not have kept! Instead of which, he will now respect the man whom he believes to be your father."

"How!" cried I, "do you dare to believe Monsieur de Lancry capable of putting faith in such an abominable falsehood? Ah! madam, I love my husband well; I feel that my love is able to withstand all trials—even that of his desertion. There is but one occasion in the world, upon which my heart would find strength to accuse him: that would be upon the day—— But, no! no! 't is impossible! impossible! But just now, he repeated to me, that this frightful calumny was destroyed by its very exaggeration."

"Very well—what do you complain of? If Gontran does not believe it—if M. de Mortagne does not believe it, what harm have I done you? I have, perhaps, prevented an unlucky occurrence, that is all; leave me alone."

"Is that all, madam? And yet you saw that I was not able to resist the violence of this horrible blow."

I could not restrain my tears, in pronouncing these last words. Mademoiselle de Maran rose, came to me, and assumed an almost affectionate tone.

"Come, come, be calm; I have doubtless been wrong, my dear. I wished to do good in my own way—I managed badly, because I was not used to it. What would you have? Upon this occasion, I have, perhaps, acted like a viper who believed himself a leech: but one should give credit, however, to the poor leech for his good intentions."

This hideous jest was revolting to me.

"I know you too well, to believe in a good sentiment on your part: your malice is not even content with the present; but embraces the future, and the past: you did not speak those words, without calculating the result: they conceal some odious after-thought, which will be, perhaps, but too soon revealed."

"Very well! what then?" cried Mademoiselle de Maran, impatiently; "what conclusion do you draw from all this? What is done, is done: is it not? Gontran chooses that you should continue to visit me; and you will obey him. What good to recriminate on my malice? I am thus constituted, and too old to change. One of two things is true: either my aversion to you is not extinct, or it is. If it is, you have nothing to fear from me; and your reproaches are useless. If it is not, all that you say to me, is as if you said nothing. You cannot injure me, and I *can* injure you:—seek not to struggle with me. I know, and can do many things. You saw how I managed this Lugarto;—to whom his colossal wealth, and the stupidity of the world, seemed to have given a brevet of audacity and insolence: now he knows, that when I bite, I bite deeply: and the scar remains. He will hate me—that I reckon upon: but at the same time he will fear me, like fire: for if I become really provoked with him, I shall hunt him from saloon to saloon, and have no pity upon him. Thus, I have him now in my control—the wretch. Remember, then, my dear, that he will always prefer to make my enemies his own, than to have me at his heels. You understand me, do you not?" added my aunt, with a look of cruel irony; "so I say no more. Only do not provoke me too far, and behave yourself properly."

I was overwhelmed with terror; I could not utter a word. What Mademoiselle de Maran said, was but too true; she alone, could place herself sufficiently above the usages of society, to attack M. Lugarto's vanity so pitilessly; and thus to govern him through his fears. I trembled, when I thought of the possibility of I know not what monstrous compact concluded between this man and Mademoiselle de Maran, a compact founded upon their common wickedness. An invincible presentiment told me, that Gontran was subjected, in spite of himself, to the influence of M. Lugarto. To what cause was this influence to be attributed? Of this I was ignorant. Assailed by these suspicions, I acknowledged, that the threats of Mademoiselle de Maran were not vain ones. Oh! it was a frightful moment, in which I felt myself obliged to restrain my resentment, against the woman who had outraged the memory of my mother.

"Come, come: I see that we understand each other, do we not?" said Mademoiselle de Maran, with her sardonic smile. "You will go to this morning ball of the English ambassadress; I shall perhaps go too, to gorgonize this Lugarto and keep him under my control. Tell me, my dear, don't you think I gave him a pretty specimen of my powers? Examine well his visage of yellow wax-work when he perceives me—that will amuse you and me too. Perhaps I will sacrifice him to you—this arch millionaire; perhaps on the contrary—but I say nothing. Who lives will see."

I quitted my aunt in an expressible state of uneasiness; I recalled her conversation to mind with a kind of terror. On all sides I saw nothing but hatred, perils, and concealed perfidy. I should have preferred open threats to the sinister dissimulation of Mademoiselle de Maran.

I returned home absorbed by these sorrowful thoughts. In a moment of despair, I thought of M. de Mortagne; but, thanks to my aunt, I was unable even to think of my only protector without a painful remembrance; without recalling to mind the painful scenes which had preceded and followed my marriage. My carriage stopped a moment before entering the court. Mechanically I raised my eyes to the house which was opposite ours. in the second story, through a half-raised curtain, I recognized M. de Mortagne seated in an easy chair; he seemed to me very pale and unwell. He made me rapidly a gesture with the hand, as if to tell me he was watching over me, and then the curtain fell. I had a moment of ineffable hope; I felt stronger and less terrified, knowing this friend so near me. I doubted not of his assistance in an extreme case. I thanked Providence for the unexpected succour, which it seemed thus to offer me.

M. de Lancry had not yet come home. I dressed for dinner, recollecting with bitter regret, that in our charming retreat of Chantilly, I took a pleasure in adorning myself, and that I then always met Gontran radiant and proud of my happiness. Alas! two days hardly separated me from this enchanting past, and already it seemed to me that months had elapsed since those happy days.

Seven o'clock struck, and Gontran had not arrived. I did not begin to be seriously uneasy, until eight o'clock. I sent Blondeau to ask M. de Lancry's valet if he had given any orders; he had given none; he was expected home to dinner. At half-past eight, being unable to conquer my fears, I determined to send one of our servants, on horse-back, to M. Lugarto's, to inquire if M. de Lancry had remained there. I wrote a note to my husband, imploring him for a word to reassure me. M. Lugarto lived in the rue de Varennes. I enjoined the utmost dispatch, and waited for the return of my messenger with painful impatience. A half-hour afterward, Blondeau entered.

"Well?" cried I.

"The viscount is at M. Lugarto's, madam. He sent word, by John, that he was very well; and that Madame should be informed that he will not return till very late."

I was but half re-assured. In order that Gontran should thus forget me, he must have been seriously engaged. I waited for him. Alas! I became acquainted, for the first time, with that consuming anxiety, under which one counts the minutes and hours—those transports of hope, caused by the slightest noise, and the sad dejection which succeeds them. I had sent poor Blondeau to the porter's lodge, with orders to watch for the return of M. de Lancry, and to come immediately and apprise me of it. Without the events of the day, such anxiety would have been puerile; but, considering all that had passed, it might, perhaps. be excused.

At midnight, Gontran had not yet returned. The most insane, the most exaggerated terrors took possession of me. I recalled to mind the sinister looks which M. Lugarto had cast toward Gontran. Without reflecting upon the improbability of my fears, I believed M. de Lancry in danger; ordered my carriage, and told Blondeau to accompany me.

"My God! whither would you go, madam?"

"To M. Lugarto's door. You will go up stairs to seek M. de Lancry, and tell him that I am waiting for him below. I cannot support this uncertainty a moment longer."

"Madame, pray take courage."

At this instant, an almost imperceptible noise reached my ear; it was the great gate which had been opened and closed again. An inexplicable instinct told me that Gontran had just returned. Without reflecting upon what I was doing, I left my chamber, and ran to meet my husband. I found him in the saloon, which communicated with his bed-chamber.

"You are here! thank God! you are here! Has nothing happened to you?" cried I, in a faltering voice, as I seized his hands.

"Nothing, nothing; but let us go to your apartments," said M. de Lancry, pointing to his valet, with a look of irritation. I comprehended the impropriety of such a scene before our servants; but my first movement had been entirely without reflection. I feared that I had vexed Gontran; my heart felt oppressed when I found myself alone with him. Then, for the first time, I remarked that he seemed very pale and harassed.

"Good heavens! Gontran; what has happened to you?" I cried.

"And what do you suppose has happened? Are you mad? Is it not all natural—very natural?" added he, with an air which was almost wild; and with a sardonic laugh, which terrified me—"What could be more simple? I find, again, one of my best friends—the tiger whom I have tamed, as you know. I present this dear Lugarto to you—he thinks you charming—you treat him with the utmost contempt. He goes to your aunt, who overwhelms him with the most cruel sarcasms. He—whose character is the best, the most inoffensive in the world—takes this pleasantry in very good part; he laughs at it, as I am laughing at it now—very gaily. In fact, there could be nothing more entertaining, more delightful, than your sarcasms and those of your aunt. They were, moreover, uncommonly apropos."

The voice of M. de Lancry was convulsed, interrupted by sudden and nervous fits of laughter. He spoke without looking at me, walking about the room in almost delirious agitation.

"My God! my God! Gontran, you terrify me. In pity, speak, what is the matter?"

My husband stopped suddenly before me, clasped both his hands over his face, seemed then to recover his senses, and said, with a terrible voice: "The matter? the matter? You do not know the man whom you and your aunt so pitilessly derided! Your infernal aunt finished what you so well began this morning. Ah, Matilda! Matilda! what have you done? Unhappy woman! may the consequences of your imprudence fall upon me alone!" added Gontran, in a dejected voice, as he left my chamber.

I would have followed him—but, with an imperious gesture, he ordered me to remain.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MORNING CALL.

I PASSED a cruel night. As soon as it was daylight, I sent Blondeau to enquire after M. de Lancry's health. He sent me word that he was perfectly well. A little before breakfast time, he entered my apartment; his face was smiling and gentle, as if the scene of the preceding night had not taken place. I was mute with astonishment. He took my hand, kissed it with great tenderness, and said:

"'T is a great culprit, who comes to ask your pardon, dearest."

There was so much gentleness, so much serenity in the voice of Gontran that in spite of myself, I felt almost encouraged. My husband's influence over me was such, that my features always reflected, as it were, the expression of his; and then, I so ardently desired to see him happy, that I was ready to accept, with perhaps too great facility, the explanation of his last night's conduct.

"Of what pardon are you talking?" said I.

"'T is very embarrassing, Matilda, for how can I confess—explain to you so great a crime!"

"A crime? you are jesting. But speak—you are pardoned beforehand."

"I know it—you are so kind—and yet I do not deserve this pardon."

"What?"

"Did I not, yesterday, make you at first weary by my absence, and afterward almost terrify you by my return?"

"'T is true—your agitation——"

"Heavens! my sweet Matilda, how dare you say, you have been kind enough to interest yourself in a miserable drunkard? There—the terrible word is pronounced. Yes, yesterday, Lugarto insisted upon my stopping to dine at his house, with several common, friends; they drank, I don't know how many, toasts to my happiness and your beauty; I could not, I did not wish to refuse. Since my bachelor days, I have, thank God! abandoned the habit of these English dinners; so may I dare to make the abominable confession, that I grew a little tipsy, while thinking of you; You see, I have but exchanged one intoxication for another. But alas! the first is as beautiful, as the other is shameful. Once more, will you pardon me?"

"What, the reproaches that you made to me yesterday, as you came in——"

"What reproaches?"

"You told me that my sarcasms and those of my aunt had irritated Lugarto to the last degree—that his vengeance might be terrible, and that——"

M. de Lancry burst into so hearty a fit of laughter, that I believed in his sincerity:

"Unhappy Lugarto! I have made an ape of him, I see. Poor Matilda! I should laugh the longer, if I had not made you uneasy. But seriously, what terrible vengeance do you suppose that Lugarto——?"

"But, dearest, yesterday morning you seemed to be vexed with the severity of my replies."

"Yes, no doubt; for I repeat, that, in spite of some eccentricities of character, I consider Lugarto one of my best friends. As such, I desire to see him sheltered from the arrows of your wit, my pretty tyrant; but that would be difficult, and I know it. People will talk of the wit of the Marans, as of the wit of the Mortemarts; however, I beg you to have compassion upon this poor fellow, if not for his own sake, at least for mine."

"But yesterday you told me you were afraid of irritating him——"

"No doubt, for then he falls into the depths of despair. He reproaches me with not loving him—with being a bad friend; in a word they are not reproaches—these I could not endure—but complaints which inspire me with more pity for him."

"And are you very sure of his friendship?" I asked Gontran, hesitatingly.

"The more sure, that it is so rarely bestowed; and because he has no reason to affect a sentiment which he does not feel."

I related to Gontran the conversation I had heard between M. Lugarto and the Princess Ksernika.

"'T is a masquerade-jest without domino," said Gontran. "He probably wished to amuse himself with tormenting her, and that is of no consequence with the princess, who is the best of women; and, by the way, if she make advances to you, respond to them, I beg of you; for she is a very good friend, when she chooses,—and good friends are rare. Moreover, you will see her this morning at the English embassy."

"Are we going to that fete, then?' said I to M. de Lancry, with an air of chagrin.

"Why, of course; the embassadress wrote me a charming letter this morning, telling me she had heard of our return only yesterday evening, and that she depended upon the pleasure of seeing you to-day."

"Well, well; so be it, dear," said I, with a sigh.

"A sigh, Matilda? Why, you will be charming! It is a triumph to be beautiful in the morning; and I am so fond of you—of your enchanting beauty——"

"Alas! dearest, this beauty belongs to you; but I am more proud of it when I adorn myself for you alone."

Gontran smiled, and said, "I guess still—your visions of love in a cottage."

"Still my dreams of happiness. Yes, Gontran."

"Well, well! be handsome—very handsome—handsomer than all the women there! I ask nothing of you but what is perfectly easy, and we will think of this folly."

"Really! oh, really!" cried I, with rapture.

"Speak low!" said Gontran; "you must whisper that to my heart, that my reason may not hear you; for she is very severe, and would say—no."

Blondeau entered, bringing a square bandbox.

"What is that?"

"I do not know, madame; it was left with the porter. It is very light, and must be either flowers or lace."

I looked at Gontran; he could not help smiling. I guessed some surprise. My heart was beating quickly. They were, perhaps, my favourite flowers that I was going to see again. With one of those childish thoughts so serious for fatalist-tempers, I said to myself, with the rapidity of thought "If I find a bouquet of heliotrope and jasmine in this box, it will be a good omen—I shall be happy, and this day will be a happy one; if not, it will be a fatal day to me."

No sooner had I thus thrown out this kind of defiance to fate, than I repented of my temerity. I did not dare to open the box. Gontran, observed that my hand trembled, that I blushed a great deal.

"Well, Matilda, what is the matter?"

"Nothing, nothing," said I; and overcoming my emotion, I opened the box.

Alas! my heart was painfully oppressed. Hardly could I restrain my tears. I found neither jasmines nor heliotropes. The flowers which had been substituted for them were charming, it is true; I had never seen any like them. There was a great bouquet and two clustres of flowers of a vivid purple. In the centre of each, a drop of solid dew, if I may so express myself, shone like a diamond. Long leaves, of an emerald green, fringed with crimson, completed this ornament, which was in such perfect taste and, no doubt, of such extreme rarily that I should have been made most happy by it, but for my unhappy wish.

How good you are!" said I to Gontran, gratefully.

"They are euphorbias,* very rare plants, and such as are needed to deck a rare beauty," said M. de Lancry, gayly; "nothing could be prettier, more coquettish, than these two branches of purple flowers in the midst of your beautiful fair hair, beneath a hat of rice-straw."

We arrived at the embassy.

The weather was radiant; the toilettes of the ladies were extremely delicate. The rays of the sun, broken and softened by the folliage of the plants, and the garlands of flowers which adorned the gallery, threw but a gentle light into the vast saloons. Generally, there is nothing more gay, more delightful, than these morning dances—where the sun takes the place of the wax-lights, where the mild atmosphere of spring laden with the perfume of the garden flowers, replaces the suffocating heat of the winter balls.

Almost as soon as I arrived, I found myself in the presence of the

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* Euphorbia fulgens. Linæus.

Duchess de Richeville; she was hanging on the arm of one of her female friends. I could not help blusking on seeing her. Gontran did not perceive it.

Madame de Richeville said to him with much grace, "I am going to restore you to your liberty in spite of yourself, and carry off Madame de Lancry; Lord Mungo is keeping two or three places for us in the gallery. Bold and adroit must he or she be, who compels him to surrender them, before our return."

M. de Lancry, although he appeared highly annoyed, could not help accepting Madame de Richeville's proposition. She took my arm, Gontran offered his to the lady who accompanied the duchess, and we directed our steps to the places reserved by Lord Mungo. He seemed to me, in fact, perfectly capable of preserving and defending them by his immobility; he was a man of unbounded corpulence. As soon as he perceived us, he made an effort to rise. Madame de Richeville said to me, with a smile, "It was, perhaps, imprudent in me to intrust our places with him; if he should not *be* able to restore them to us."

Thanks to a new effort, however, Lord Mungo arose, and we all three seated ourselves perfectly at our ease. Gontran retired after having given me an expressive look, as he glanced toward Madame de Richeville. At my left was a perfect thicket of camelias, the duchess was at my right; thus, by turning toward my side, she could talk to me in a low voice without being heard by anybody.

"Mon Dieu!" said she, "I must appear very bold to you, do I not, after what has passed between us!"

"Madam!"

"Be not offended with me; I wished to speak with you concerning our friend, M. de Mortagne. He has been in great danger."

"What say you, madam?"

"No doubt; he has suffered so much! and then his emotions had agitated him so keenly; he is still suffering, but he is better."

"I know it, madam; yesterday, as I returned to my house——"

"You saw him at the window? Yes, he has gone to live in the house opposite yours, in order to be nearer to you. If you knew how much he loves you! all his fears——Well! no—no—let us not talk of that any longer, continued the duchess at a movement which I made. I hope that he and I have both been deceived; you seem happy. 'T is a conversion which you have wrought—I am not astonished—only I did not dare to hope it."

"I am indeed very happy, madam, just as I foresaw."

"And I assure you that I am very happy at being deceived in my forebodings. But I beg you, now that we are almost alone, do not forget, if you have any letters to send to M. de Mootagne, to address them, rue de Grenelle, hotel de Richeville. In case he should be absent some days—in fine, my poor child, whatever happens to you, on whatever occasion it may be, remember that you have in me a very true, a very devoted friend. That seems strange to you, does it not? All that I ask of you, to put the friendship I offer you to the proof; it will never fail you."

At this moment, M. Lugarto entered the gallery. Involuntarily, I made a movement of fear, and drew near the duchess.

"What is the matter, pray?" said she.

"I am a little cold, madam: there is much air coming through the gallery."

Madame de Richeville saw, accidentally, M. Lugarto who was conversing with several persons. She observed, as she pointed him out to me:

"Do you see that man?"

"Yes, madam," said I, trembling.

"Well! your aunt is an angel of gentleness, compared to him! He is the embodiment of pride in baseness, and cowardice in cruelty: still he is received. Last year he ruined, utterly ruined, an unhappy young woman—a Madame de Berny—who is, at this moment, alone—abandoned by her family, repulsed by all the world! He behaved toward her in the most brutal the most scandalous, the most cruel manner. Monsieur de Berny, whether from weakness, or contempt, has taken refuge in a contemptuous indifference to the lot of his wife. So Monsieur Lugarto goes once more unpunished! Since men are such cowards, it should be for the women, at least, to take vengeance upon Lugarto and his fellows. Nor do I conceive, how such a person is tolerated in society; or how it is that people will answer him, when he addresses them; for he is familiar, and his impupence is great."

I remained silent. I foresaw, that M. Lugarto would come near me. In effect, Madame de Richeville was ttill speaking as he advanced, made me a slight salutation, and extended his hand, saying: "Well, you have come to the ball! You were right to listen to me."

Seeing that I did not take the hand he offered, he continued, with a sardonic smile: "We are. then, still at war? I had, however, reason to suppose the contrary, seeing you wear the flowers which I sent you this morning."

"I do not understand you, sir!" I replied. And then addressing Madame de Richeville, I asked the name of two pretty women, who came in at that moment.

M. Lugarto. without being disconcerted, continued: "You do not understand me? What I say, however, appears clear enough. The flowers you have in your hand and hair, are from my green-house. 'T was I wno sent them to you this morning. You may be sure, at least, that I do not give them to everybody! Last spring, I gave the same bouquet to pretty little Madame de Berny. It gave her much pleasnre."

These flowers, for which I had thought myself indebted to Gontran, now inspired me with horror. It was cruel, to think that my husband had arranged with this man to make me accept them. I saw something unlucky in the apparent coincidence of circumstance, between me and the lady of whom Madame de Richeville had first been speaking. I could not repress a movement of anger. In my vexation, I tore some leaves from the bouquet I held in my hand.

"Beware!" cried M. Lugarto, showing me a white liquor which oozed from the stalk of the torn leaves; "your hand is bare; that substance is very corrosive. These flowers are beautiful; but the plant which bears them, is very venomous."

In fact, a drop of this powerful liquid had fallen upon my hand. I felt a slight sensation of pain; and there remained a small, livid speck upon the skin. There was, doubtless, no reason for being astonished at the known property of the flowers. But, remembering that they came from the man who inspired me with so much terror, it was impossible not to draw sinister auguries, when I reflected, that there seemed something fatal—something mortal, even, in his presents! Seized with terror, I threw the bouquet into the midst of the camelias which stood near me. M. Lugarto smiled, and said: "One would suppose, that you had been bitten by a serpent. 'T is a great pity, that you could not throw as far from you those clusters of the same flowers which deck your beautiful hair! I am delighted, to see you obliged to wear them, in spite of yourself."

"Oh! madam!" said I, in a low voice to Madame de Richeville, "all that is passing here, seems to me a horrible dream. Take me away, I conjure you! Let us go and find Monsieur de Lancry: I wish to retire."

"I am astounded," said the duchess, "are you acquainted with this man?"

"Not I, madam; he is an intimate friend of my husband, who introduced him to me; he inspires me with as much terror as aversion. Oh! for pity's sake, take me away!"

While I was talking in a low voice with the duchess, M. Lugarto was replying with an absent and haughty air to the eager remarks of some young men, who were great admirers of his luxurious establishment and of his horses. Madame de Richeville remained for a moment silent and absorbed, and then said with an accent of profound emotion: "Bless God, my dear child, that he has restored M. de Mortagne to you. I hardly know why—this intimacy between your husband and M. Lugarto terrifies me. Come and look for M. de Lancry; you are quite pale!"

"Yes, madam and then—it is childish, but it seems to me as if these flowers which are on my forehead made me dizzy."

I do not know wheteer M. Lugarto heard me or not; but leaving the persons who surrounded him, he turned towards us at the moment that Madame de Richeville and myself were rising. "You are going away from this place," said he to me, "will you take my arm?",

Without making him any reply, I pressed close to Madame de Richeville.

"By the way, Madame la Duchesse," said M. Lugarto, letting his words fall one by one, and watching the effect which they produced, "I have a somewhat insignificant question to address to you: is it long since old Mademoiselle Albin has been to the village of Bory, in Anjou, at farmer Anselm's?"

Madame de Richeville was astounded—blushed and turned pale alternately, as the Princess Ksernika had blushed and grown pale the day before. M. Lugarto looked at me with an air of triumph. Suddenly his features changed their expression, his impertinent audacity disappeared under a mask of forced humility . he bowed twice, with obsequious politeness, to a person whom I could not see. I turned, it was M. de Rochegune. The latter responded, by a cold bow, to the eager civilities of M. Lugarto, and approached Madame de Richeville. Still overcome by her emotion, the duchess had not been able to utter a word. Madame de Richeville seemed to experience a profound sentiment of joy upon seeing M. de Rochegune.

"How much good your presence does me," said she; "I feel better since you are here."

M. de Rochegune looked at Madame de Richeville with an air of astonishment:

"Good Heavens! madam! what is the matter?" said he.

"Nothing, a trifle. You know that I believe in presentiments; Madame de Lancry partakes of my sentiments; we have just been frightened about nothing; but, upon seeing you—a man so pre-eminently sober and reasonable, our foolish visions quickly vanished."

As Madame de Richeville mentionad my name, M. de Rochegune bowed respectfully to me. I had not seen him since the scene of recognition, of which I had been witness at the house with my aunt and Gontran. He seemed much changed; a melancholy smile imparted a singularly sad character to a countenance at once gentle and grave.

"You have, not been long upon your travels, sir; your friends must have been delighted with your speedy return," said M. Lugarto to M. de Rochegune with an excessive affability; "you will allow me, I hope, to pay my respects to you one of these days?"

"I should regret your taking the trouble, sir, for I am rarely at home;" replied M. de Rochegune, in an icy tone.

"If I am not fortunate in my first visit, sir, I may be so in my second; I am not easily discouraged, when a matter to which I attach much importance, is concerned."

"You are too good, sir; I fear that you very much exaggerate the value of my acquaintance; besides, I have here such a very humble lodging, that I am really only able to receive *my friends* there."

These last words, spoken very drily, terminated the conversation. M. Lugarto dissembled his vexation, and wishing, no doubt, to be revenged on some one, he said to Madame de Richeville:

"You will not forget the token I have given you, Madame le Duchesse? When you desire it, I will have the honor of coming to converse with you."

To my great astonishment and that of M. de Rochegune, Madame de Richeville replied, in a tone of emotion: "To-morrow, if you choose, sir. You will find me at home between four and five."

"I shall not fail to profit by this good fortune, Madame le Duchesse, said M. Lugarto, bowing profoundly. Then addressing himself to me: "Ah! madam," said he, "beware! I denounce M. de Lancry to you as faithless! I perceive him carrying on a great flirtation with the fair Princess de Ksernika, who is very expeditious, I assure you—for, with her, a caprice takes very quickly the character of passion. Stay: do you see this monster of a de Lancry? he is so absorbed that he does not recollect even that you are here!"

In fact, Gontran was crossing a saloon with the Princess Ksernika; she held his arm, and he was talking to her in an under tone, with a smile. She cast down her eyes, blushed slightly, smiled also, and made a slight movement of impatience. Gontran seemed to persist in his request; she raised her eyes to his, met his look, and instead of avoiding it, it seemed that she took pleasure in dwelling upon it. Then, as if M. de Lancry had just then remembered, or become aware of my presence; he made a sudden movement, said a word to the princess, with a glance toward me, and the expression of their countenances changed in an instant. All this passed in less time than I can relate it; for the first time I felt jealousy. Never shall I forget the painful, profound sensation I felt on seeing the princess smiling thus on Gontran. Strange and cruel mystery! This jealousy took sudden and complete possession of all my faculties; it seemed to me that, for a long time, I had been *habituated to this suffering!*

In an instant, I experienced its hatreds, its distrusts, its humiliations! I escaped none of its varied tortures. Alas! jealousy is one of those sentiments which commence in terrible maturity; like Minerva, it is born armed at all points. My spirit was broken, my cheeks were covered with a hectic flush; Gontran approached, with the princess upon his arm. The latter came toward me with a smiling and candid air. I felt my tears ready to flow; I could only bow, without replying to certain amiable words which she addressed to me.

"M. de Rochegune, will you give me your arm ?" said madame de Richeville. "Will you have the kindness to order my carriage ?"

"You here, M. de Rochegune ?" said Gontran, extending his hand to the latter, "I thought you on your journey. I hope you have not quite forgotten the road to your old house, and that Madame de Lancry may have the pleasure of seeing you often."

"I expect to remain but a very short time in Paris," said M. de Rochegune; "but I shall not forget your very kind proposal—and I shall at least do myself the honor of calling to take leave of Madame de Lancry, if she will grant me that favor!"

I made a mechanical reply; Madame de Richeville and M. de Rochegune quitted the gallery.

"I should like to go away, I am a little unwell." said I to M. de Lancry.

"Not yet, Matilda; the princess has made her way through all the crowd to find you:"

M. Lugarto approached Madame de Ksernika; it seemed to me that they exchanged a look of intelligence. The princess, so haughty the day before, said to him, with a kind of timid affability:

"I pardon your malice; you are a terrible man, at best." She then turned to me and added, seating herself at my side, "I am taking the place of Madame de Richeville, of whom I was really jealous."

"You are very good. madam, but——"

"I am going to make a tour round the ball-room with Lugarto," said Gontran to me. "I will return for you in a moment, if you wish it.'

M. de Lancry took M. Lugarto's arm, and both retired: I remained with the princess.

"Do you know," said the princess to me, very gayly, "that you have a charming husband ? I have only known him by reputation; for, since my appearance in the world, it has always happened, that either he has been away, or I; but I count upon making myself amends this season: in the first place, I begin by telling you that we are already in desperate flirtation, and I am almost sorry for it, for he seems very dangerous. Ah! what shall you say, if I should take him away from you ?"

The princess might nave talked a long time, without my thinking of replyng. What she had first said might pass for one of those pleasantries which the world tolerates. Each one of her words, however, inflicted a severe blow upon me. My love for Gontran wes so devoted, so serious, so fervent—that love, in short, upon which my life, my whole destiny reposed, was for me the object of so religious a worship, that even if my jealousy had not been painfully excited, I should have been wounded by the lightness with which the princess spoke. There is, in every sincere and profound sentiment which feels its own value, a kind of suspicious austerity, of fierce susceptibility, of sacred modesty, which is revolted by the slightest profanation. Thus, thinking of my isolation—of my distrustful character—of the misfortunes of my childhood—of the vast hopes I had founded upon my marriage with Gontran, my sentiments will be perhaps comprehended.

The princess, astonished at my silence, observed, "You seem lost in a revery, madam; pray, what can you be thinking of ?"

I was upon the point of telling her candidly the state of my feelings, and of imploring her, in the name of my hdppiness, not to *coquet* with Gontran; when I reflected upon the absurdity of such a proceeding. I gave it up the world is so constituted, that it has nothing but contempt or sarcasm for the expression of a legitimate and ingenuous grief. Then my pride was aroused; words full of gall and bitterness came to my lips; I strove to inspire myself with the malice of Mademoiselle de Maran; I strove, but in vain, to find some cutting repartee. I was too unhappy to be witty. Obliged to reply io a second remonstrance of the princess, I could find nothing to say but this piece of foolishness, which I uttered with a bitter smile.

"I do not doubt, madam, the power of your charms."

"Mon Dieu! with what a tragic and sombre air do you tell me that!" replied Madame de Ksernika, laughing outright. "Do you happen to be iealous ? and jealous of your husband, too ? That would be too exquisite."

"Madam ?——"

"Ah! do not give way to this ridiculous weakness, at least; 'twould make me wretched. My triumph would be much less—jealousy would make you lose a great part of your superiority over me. But consider for a moment my pretensions—my vanity! I dare to enter into a contest with you, armed as you are with so many advantages! Confess that it is very heroic!"

I was in agony; the habit of dissembling my sorrow, the habit I had contracted during my sad childhood, was necessary to prevent my weeping bitterly. Alas! I had not thought so soon to have recourse to this faculty, the fruit of the miserable past. All the powers of my mind were employed in this restraint. I felt that I was about to make another foolish reply, and almost in spite of myself, I faltered out these silly words:

"Are you talking seriously? madam?"

The princess again began to laugh heartily.

"What? am I talking seriously!" she continued. "What a boarding-school-girl question! Why, certainly; everything I tell you is very serious. I am desperately smitten with M. de Lancry, and you see in me a declared rival, ready to dispute his heart with you in every possible way. Delightful task! to obtain a charming conquest over a redoubtable adversary!"

I looked fixedly at Madame de Ksernika, in order to penetrate the bottom of her thoughts. 'Twas impossible; the expression of her features was so fleeting and changeable. By degrees I recovered my coolness, I surmounted my emotion; I strove to assume a light and buoyant air.

"But, madam," I replied, "do you know that you risk much in entering the lists with me?"

"Certainly; and 'tis that I am proud of; for in short, you are far more beautiful, far younger, far more agreeable than I," said the princess in a mocking voice.

"This is not the question, madam. That which constitutes my superiority is, that I have, unlike you, a reputation to preserve."

"How so, madam?" said the princess looking at me with surprise; "your reputation!

"Oh, madam! I have mine as you have yours. There are all sorts of them."

Madame de Ksernika made a movement of vexation. I continued hastily:

"Yours is a reputation of irresistible beauty, established by brilliant, and especially by *numerous successes.* If, in our contest, you triumph once more, a new conquest will not much augment your glory; while, if you are vanquished———judge, then, madam, the question will be by whom? By a poor young woman, without experience, who is just entering the world, and who has the bad taste to contend for her husband, or, if you like it better, for her happiness.

The princess assumed her haughty manner, and said with much severity, "You are offended, madam?"

I saw by these words that my answer had hit the mark; I felt a bitter joy. "Not at all, madam, for we are jesting. I believe—"

Gontran returned with M. Lugarto.

"Princess," said M. de Lancry, "Mesdames d'Aubeterre and M. de Saint Prix, have just arranged a party to the theatre, and an hotel supper afterward, for this evening; would it suit you to join it with Madame de Lancry, myself, and Lugarto?"

Certainly! with the greatest pleasure," she replied.

"This is what we propose," added M. de Lancry. "It will soon be six o'clock—the weather is delightful—we propose a drive in the Bois de Boulogne till half-past seven, and then we are to go to see Arnal at the 'Vaudeville.'"

"Delightful!" said the princess; "'t is adopted unanimously, is it not, Madame de Lancry!"

"I am so unwell," said I, to Gontran, "that I must beg to be excused from this pleasure."

"Do not think of such a thing!" replied M. de Lancry; "on the contra it will do you good."

"Arnal is delightful, in the first piece," said M. Lugarto.

"I beg it of you!" said I, casting an imploring look at my husband.

"M. de Lancry, be inexorable," said the princess; "act the tyrant—co mand——"

"We should all suffer so much by the absence of Madame de Lancry said Gontran, with a smile, "that I must needs follow the cruel counsel of the princess. Thus, then," said he, with comic emphasis, "Madame de Lancry, I positively order you to come and pass a charming evening with us."

"If you insist—" said I, to Gontran.

"No doubt—we all insist," added M. Lugarto.

"'T is agreed," resumed Gontran. I am going to notify Saint Prix and Madame d'Aubeterre, and send immediately to engage the proscenium boxes, and to order supper at Very's."

"But now I think of it," said the princess, "Madame de Serigny brought me hither, and I did not order my people here."

"Nothing is more simple, princess," replied M. Lugarto. "Lancry disposes of his carriage in sending for the tickets—I offer mine to you, and to Madame de Lancry, and Gontran also."

"Nothing could be better," said my hushand, offering his arm to Madame de Ksernika. "Let us join those ladies; they are waiting for us."

M. Lugarto offered me his arm, with a smile of triumph. It was impossible for me to refuse it, notwithstanding my repugnance. He said to me, in a low voice, "It makes you unhappy to be adorned with *my* flowers, to accept *my* arm, to drive in *my* carriage. I am very sorry, but it is your own fault; why do you treat me so badly, that all my intentions to oblige you, seem quite the reverse."

I made no reply. I traversed those saloons filled with gay and happy people; the open windows, the garden with all its treasures of flowers and verdure. I contemplated this delightful picture. I heard the music of the orchestra; my heart seemed dead within me. The contrast was insupportable to me. I was much looked at. I heard my own name murmured and that of M. Lugarto; I reddened with shame, thinking that all the world had the same contempt for him that I had. I was miserable, at seeming instinctively connected with this man. It was not so, however, at least, apparently; men exchanged a cordial salute or a few obliging words with him; many ladies smiled upon him as they replied to his salute; he stopped a moment in the embrasure of a door.

The young Marchioness de Serigny, a very fine lady, however, approached M. Lugarto, and said, "I am just going to make a request of you, in the name of a host of pretty women——"

"Well, well; let us hear what it is about?" said M. Lugarto.

"About two charming balls that you must give us this spring, to celebrate your return; you understand arranging a fete so well! It would be delicious."

"Yes, yes; give us some spring balls, M. Lugarto," said several young ladies, joining themselves to Madame de Serigny.

M. Lugarto turned to me, and said very loud, with his shocking familiarity, "Come, let us see! decide: do you say yes or no, that I shall give some balls? Fix the time, the number, and I obey you—you."

I was crimson with shame; all eyes were turned toward me. I remarked several malicious smiles; my heart was oppressed, I could not speak a word.

"Lancry, pray answer for your wife," said Lugarto to my husband, who was before us; "I ask her, if she wishes that I shall give some balls; she does not say yes or no."

"Give them by all means," said Gontran; "I am sure that discretion alone prevents Madame de Lancry from saying yes."

"Well, then, ladies, since it is agreeable to Madame de Lancry, I shall give four balls."

"Two morning balls, and two evening balls, with an illumination in your magnificent garden; it will be enchanting," said Madame de Serigny.

"Perhaps so," replied M. Lugarto. "I will not be necessary for me to consult a lady of my acquaintance, (and he cast another expressive look towards me,) and one in whom I have the utmost confidence."

"M. Lugarto, you are always charming," said several ladies.

"No doubt, when I give balls for you," replied he, insolently. We retired to wait for our carriages.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SUPPER.

I WAS overwhelmed by the impudenee with which M. Lugarto had addressed me, and by the indiscreet effrontery with which women of the best and highest society, in their immoderate love of pleasure, begged fetes of a man whom they ought to have treated with contempt.

The carriage of M. Lugarto came up.

"Nobody in the world has such horses as these," said the princess.

"They are dear enough to be magnificent; the pair cost him fifteen thousand francs," said M. de Lancry.

We set out for the Bois de Boulogne; M de Saint Prix and Mesdames d'Aubeterre followed in another carriage. Plunged in utter sorrow, I was overwhelmed by the height of the violent emotions of the fete day. The artificial and feverish strength which had sustained me a moment had entirely abandoned me. I had in vain promised myself to contend with the princess in wit, spirit, and gaiety; without abusing myself with any vain pride, I had seen that I was able to embarrass her; but I had no longer the courage to attempt it. I fell into a sort of mournful depression; I resigned myself. In thought, I consecrated to Gontran the sacrifice that I was making in participating in the *joys* of this evening, which was to me torturing. I perceived, with a sort of bitter consolation, that even while I was suffering much jealous anguish, my love for Gontran had not experienced the slightest diminution. I can compare this impression, I believe, to nothing better than to that of a mother weeping for the errors of a child whom she adores; she hates his faults, but cherishes him still.

Oh! in the invincible love of woman there is a sentiment of magnificent charity, far above the intelligence and the faculties of the vulgar. The more we suffer, the more we desire to save him, who causes our sorrow from suffering; we put in practice with a pious resignation that gospel precept of divine simplicity:—Do not unto others that which you would not they should do unto you." I remember, that this thought came into my mind at a moment when the princess was laughing very loudly and heartily at a jest of Gontran's, at the ridiculous figure of a man who was just passing us on horseback. There was such a contrast between my ideas and those which they were expressing, that at first I almost blushed with shame; afterward came a contrary reaction; I could not help casting a look of utter contempt upon the princess, as I half-raised myself from the corner of the caleche in which I was reclining.

Gontran observed it; he seized a moment when M. Lugarto and Madame de Ksernika were leaning out at one of the windows, to see Monseigneur the Duc de Bourdeux pass, as he was returning from Bagatelle, and he said to me impatiently in a very low voice:

"You do not seem to be ill, but only disagreeable. You will get the reputation in society of an insupportable character; 't is ridiculous to the last degree: one exhausts himself in discovering amusement for you, and you respond by the most contemptuous silence."

"Gontran, I assure you, that I am unwell." And two tears, restrained for a long time, came into my eyes.

"Come, come, tears too! nothing more was needed to complete the picture," said he, shrugging his shoulders.

I hung down my head, I placed my handkerchief upon my lips, I concealed my tears. No doubt, Gontran regretted his movement of impatience; for, as I raised my eyes, to show him that I was no longer weeping they met his own.

Oh! never! never shall I forget the look, filled with sadness, and kindness, which he cast upon me. Then his features contracted—with a movement more rapid than thought; for a second, his face, which was so beautiful, so noble, wore the impression of a terrible despair. I could not restrain a slight exclamation, so great was my terror. The princess and M. Lugarto, turned quickly.

My husbands features had resumed their expression of habitual gaiety as he said:

"Pardon me, my dear Matilda; I am very clumsy, I have almost crushed your pretty foot."

The hour for the theatre arrived: we repaired thither, with the persons who were to accompany us; the Mesdames d'Aubeterre, and their uncle M. de Saint Prix. The ladies were, fortunately, insignificant enough, and talked a great deal. The gentlemen were worth about as much. I placed myself in a corner of the box: M. Lugarto took a seat behind me.

Gontran seemed engrossed by the princess. The latter had the bad taste to draw upon herself, several times, an energetic *hush*; so inordinate were her fits of laughter. I answered, by rare monosyllables, to what M. Lugarto said; I conversed a little with the ladies d'Aubeterre, who sat near me. The buffooneries of the theatre would have perhaps amused me, in another frame of mind; but they now seemed insupportable.

Before the last piece, we went away to sup at Very's. M. de Lancry was seated between the princess, and one of the Countesses d'Aubeterre. I had upon my right, M. Lugarto, on my left, M. de Saint Prix. I hoped to escape from the former, by conversing with the latter; but in vain. M. de Saint Prix was a great gourmand; he took the supper very seriously, and hardly answered me.

"Lancry is right, you have a very unhappy character; for you do not know your own friends," said M. Lugarto, in a manner to be heard by me alone; "but, in time, you will get the better of your unjust prejudices.

I made no answer. He continued in the same tone.

"I heard your husband inviting M. de Rochegune to come and see you. I hope you will not often receive that original: he is as tedious, as vain; and I detest him for my part."

"You detest him, no doubt, as much as you fear him, sir; for this morning you were more than polite to him."

"Ah! you defend him;" said he, looking fixedly at me.

"I depend upon reckoning M. de Rochegune, in the number of my friends, he is a man of high birth, of rare learning, and a noble heart."

"Ah! ah! 't is just so: 't is good to know this," said M. Lugarto, with the convulsive smile, which, with hfm, always announced repressed rage.

I was silent: I was firmly resolved to have a final explation with M. de Lancry, concerning this man. Several vague presentiments told me, that some perfidious plot was forming, of which Gontran and I were to be the victims. As I recalled the expression of despair, which had a moment contracted M. de Lancry's features, I made a thousand contradictory suppositions. I could not reconcile his appearance of gaiety, and his devotion to the princess, with the tender, dejected, almost imploring look which he had cast upon me by stealth.

This fatal day ended, at length. Alas! it was doomed to contain, so to speak, in their germ, many future sorrows!

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I have just read over these pages, and this reflection seems to me still more correct; there is not one of the most insignificant events of that day, which had not, at a later period, a cruel development.

CHAPTER IX.

AN EXPLANATION.

Many days passed. The Princess de Ksernika came to see me. Believing, no doubt, that she would have no advantage over me, in a sarcastic conversation, she contented herself with overwhelming me with words of affection. Gontran appeared to be very much devoted to her, when he met her in society. M. Lugarto came, nearly every day, to see my husband; he did not cease to persecute me with his odious presence. In spite of all I could do—in spite of the observations which I had made to Gontran—this man very often sent me flowers. He asked my husband for a seat in our opera box, at the end of the season; in spite of my supplications, he granted it to him. To all my objections, he had but this one reply: "Lugarto is my intimate friend; I neither can, nor will, break off a very old connection, to satisfy an antipathy of yours, which is as unjust as it is unreasonable. Lugarto is disagreeable to you; be it so; you only make it too evident to him. I leave you to act your pleasure; leave me the same liberty in this respect; only, for propriety's sake, treat him decently before the world."

I had already discovered that Gontran's will was not to be shaken. I resigned myself. Fortunately, I parceived a notable change in M. Lugarto's manner to me. Instead of pursuing me with his conversation when he was in society with us, he hardly spoke a word to me. Several times, Gontran had obliged me to offer a seat in our box to the Princess de Ksernika. I continued to suffer cruelly from my jealous suspicions. Twenty times I was on the point of speaking to Gontran upon the subject; I did not dare. I remembered what I had been told of my mother; of the calm endurance with which she fell back upon herself, under the weight of her sorrow. I felt myself possessed of the same power. I restrained, I concealed my grief; I never appeared before M. de Lancry, but with a calm and serene brow.

At first, I used to interrogate myself every day, almost with terror, in order to learn if my love for Gontran had suffered any diminution; it was not so. In the pride of my devotion, I waited with a kind of melancholy faith, until my husband should recognise the nothingness of the affection to which he was sacrificing me without scruple. Moreover, setting aside the apparent attention he paid to Madame de Ksernika, Gontran was affable and kind to me. He did not suspect how much I suffered; for I found him constantly gay and happy.

I vainly sought to discover, in his features, that fugitive expression of despair, which had once struck me so forcibly; and which, for an instant, had induced me to believn that his course of conduct had been prescribed by the mysterious influence of M. Lugarto. I deceived myself, however, in away from me. Moreover I should have almost considered a complaint, against Gontran as sacrilegious. Generally, one complains only to excuse her reprisals, or to display her resignation. I loved Gontran more than ever; my resignation was so natural, that I never thought of being vain of it. An immense and solitary grief, was gradually accumulating at my heart. In proportion as this grief took possession of me, I experienced a singular sensation: I felt myself becoming more and more opressed; as if, little by little, the air was failing me. I feared that there might come a moment, when my soul would overflow: when, in spite of myself, I should utter a first cry of anguish, and implore Gontran to have mercy upon me.

That moment arrived.

For some time I had been unwell. One morning, I said to my husband, "Gontran, I demand the fulfilment of a promise of yours, which is very dear to me."

"What do you mean, Matilda?"

"You gave me reason to hope, that we should pass some time in our cottage at Chantilly. It it now nearly the end of May; it seens to me, that the pure air of the forest would do me good."

"What! you still think of that nonsense? Why, the old rattle-trap was pulled down a week ago. My agent informed me, that the administrator of the Duc de Bourbon's domains had taken possession of it. That matter is at an end."

I had hitherto preserved a glimmering of hope; seeing myself obliged to renounce it, I burst into tears. Gontran seemed annoyed, and said: "Why, really, my dear, you have not common sense, to weep for such a trifle. I have already told you, that although we are rich, our fortune is not sufficient to gratify all your caprices."

"Caprices! I have very few, Gontran; and that one was sacred and holy to me!"

Once more—what is done is done! 'Tis impossible to annul the sale; these are, moreover, nothing but dreams of romance. If one was obliged to purchase all the places where one had been happy one would find himself, at the end of a certain time, singularly embarrassed by these commemorative pieces of property, which yield only an income of souvenirs. Unfortunately, in this age of iron, we need other revenues to support us."

This pleasatry of Gontran's made me very unhappy. I had always believed in his respect for those blessed days; I could not help replying to him with tears: "Alas! dearest; this piece of foolish extravagance, as you term it, was a solitary one."

That is to say, that since that time, you find yourself very unhappy, no doubt?"

"No! no! I make no complaint; only I regret those happy days, when you were entirely mine; when we only lived for each other."

"Since the occasion presents itself," resumed M. de Lancry, after a long silence, "I will improve it, by giving you some advice, by which I hope you will profit. I know not what romantic idea you may have formed of marriage; but, permit me to tell you what it ought to be, for reasonable people. Like two lovers, or rather, like two children, we played at solitary happiness; at love in a cottage. All exaggeration has its limits; we have done with all these pastoral joys. We now ought to find in marriage only a sweet intimacy, founded upon reciprocal confidence, and, particularly upon reciprocal liberty; we belong to the world; we must live for, and like the world."

"Gontran, do you recollect your telling me: For me, marriage is love is passion, is a union sanctified by God!' Do you remember your telling me farther: 'It would be impossible for me to submit myself to those cold and monstrous relations in which the heart has no share!"

"I told you that! I told you that! no doubt! I did so, because I was then persuaded that the dream might be realized! I spoke in good faith."

And you were not mistaken, Gontran. Oh! that hope was no chimera! for me, at least. nothing is changed—love!—passion in marriage! it is, or rather, if you were willing, it should be my life, my happiness always."

"Women always mistake their realities. You deceive yourself singularly; you are younger than I. Your illusion may endure a little longer than mine; but, like mine, it will be dissipated. You will find that your romantic love must, like everything else, have its limits."

"Gontran! for pity's sake, do not blaspheme."

"All that is but talk; 'tis better to look at life as it is: one is all the happier for it. The proof of it is, that for some time past you have been in a miserable frame of mind, while I have been of a more equable temper.

Think as I do; renounce these imaginary idols, and you will attain that placidity, that indulgent temper, which makes marriage a paradise instead of a hell."

"Oh! my God! my God! to hear this—from you! from you!" cried I, burying my head in my hands to stifle my sobs."

"Come, come! a scene again. Ah! what a character!"

"No! no! Gontran, I shall make no scene. Listen! I will speak frankly to you. Yes! I must now tell to you what I have been suffering this long time. You are ignorant of it—for, otherwise, you would not make sport of my sorrow. You are so good, so generous——"

I took M. de Lancry's hand in mine.

"Well, then, speak, Matilda. If I have tormented you, 'twas without knowing it. If your reproaches are reasonable, I will accuse myself; you will pardon me, and, in future, I will never do so again—as children say," added he, shrugging his shoulders.

"I expected no more of your heart, dearest. You encourage me; your gayety dissipates the painful impression which your words caused me but just now. Laugh well, at your poor Matilda," added I, forcing a smile, after a moment's silence. "She is jealous of the Princess de Ksernika. Yes; your attentions to her make me very unhappy. Since you have been occupied with her, you seem to forget me."

"Are these all your reproaches? And what conclusion do you arrive at?"

"That you might make me as happy as in times past, by granting me one thing, which will cost you nothing."

"Very well; speak!" said he, impatiently.

"I should like to break off our almost intimate connection with the Princess ——; and, by degrees, cease to see her."

"This is what you demand of me? Ah! you are mad!"

"Gontran!"

"How!" cried he, in a passion, "I cannot be courteous—polite, to a lady, without your pursuing me with your jealousy? How! under pretext of calming your dreams, you require me to treat with impertinence a person who only merits your consideration—your respect! You are beside yourself!"

"Very well—yes—I shall be, if my sufferings are prolonged. Gontran—believe me, my apparent calmness conceals many sorrows! By the memory of my poor mother, who also suffered so much, I swear to you, that which I have been a long time enduring, is beyond my strength!"

"And what do you wish me to do?" cried he, in still greater rage. "Am I responsibe for the dreams which you invent to torment yourself with?"

"But, if these appearances are false, dissipate them, by granting my request."

"But it is exactly because these appearances are wholly without foundation, that I tell you, once more, I cannot coolly insult a lady who is my friend and yours."

"But, if it concerns my happiness, Gontran—my repose?"

"Listen to me, Matilda," said Gontran, containing himself with difficulty; "I am right, and will be heard. It is my duty, to do only what I consider just and proper: just as I told you, on the subject of your repugnance to Mademoiselle de Maran, and your objections to receive my intimate friend. You will find me inflexible, where your extravagant caprices are concerned; that is to say, there will be nothing—understand me—nothing changed, in our relations with the princess!"

"Thus, then, you will continue to be devoted to her? Thus, then, in society, all your looks—all your attentions, will be for her? Thus, then, it will be always your arm she is to take in her walks? It is to be always she—my God! always she!"

"Do you not prefer, that it shall be you; you—always you—in order that both you and I shall be covered with ridicule? Ah! madam, if your manners were not so icy—so disdainful, you would be sufficiently surrounded, to find an arm in the place of mine! There are a thousand innocent coquetries, perfectly understood by the world, which permit a woman to require from the men about her, those attentions, which her husband cannot render her without being pointed at. But no! your haughtiness, your disdainfulness, alienate all the world from you. And after that, you complain of being isolated! If I did as you do, where should I be? I should be one of those uncomfortable, jealous husbands, who never speak to a lady, nor budge from the ball-room doorways; and who, a the hour of midnight, stalk forth, like the sceptre in the ballad, to bear away, with gloomy look, their wives from their partners in the dance! What is the consequence? Why;

these husbands make themselves ridiculous! So, my dear, both on your account and my own, I am determined never to play a similar part."

"So:" cried I, bitterly, "it is necessary for me to submit, without a murmur, to those strange laws of the world, which declare it supremely improper for a husband to pay attention to his wife, or to bestow upon her a portion of the care which he lavishes upon another? Singular usage! which consecrates, as it were, the appearances of infidelity as a custom of good society; which brands, as unpardonably ridiculous, every legitimate and natural expression of feeling! You shrug your shoulders, Gontran. These reflections of an ulcerated heart excite your pity, do they not?"

"Once more, madam: Since we live in the world, for the love of Heaven! let us live like people of the world. As for me, I am resolved to make no change in my conduct; and I desire—I do not like to say I *choose*—that you should modify yours. 'Tis painful enough to me, to see you respond so ungraciously to the attentions of my best friend; but I have announced all hope in that quarter. Fortunately, Lugarto's affection for me is not one to be chilled by a fantasy—by an unreasonable antipathy——"

"And I tell you, that you have not a more mortal enemy than that man!" cried I, "and I tell you, that he is the sole cause of all my sorrows and your own! The instinct of my heart does not deceive me; he exercises over you, I know not what mysterious influence. I am ignorant of its causes; but it exists—understand me, Gontran—it exists. Many a time, in spite of your apparent serenity, I have detected upon your features the expression of a sombre despair. These are no longer suspicions; they are certainties. This man I hate—as you do, yourself, at the bottom of your heart. You know I am in the right; you partake my hatred——!"

"But this is intolerable! Ah! why, madam, do you suppose that I should debase myself, by feigning a friendship which I do not feel?"

"There is the mystery, Gontran; and, if I were not afraid—— Ah! why should I fear to tell you? Is not your happiness—my happiness—concerned? Very well. Yes, this man governs you, in spite of yourself, and you dare not avow to me the cause of his dominion; and yet, do you know me so little, as to doubt that I could pardon you everything? Can you have any false shame with regard to me? In uniting myself with you, did I not mean to share, not only your future destiny, but, if I may so express it, your past life also? My husband, I am courageous; I shall find strength—immense resources—in my love. You find me weak and irresolute; you will find me, in the same degree, courageous and determined, when the object is to save you."

"To save me! And, pray, from what would you save me? It is enough to drive a man to distraction!"

"Good Heaven! allow me to speak plainly. This man rules you: that is the truth. He has, perhaps, discovered some secret of yours, as he has of the princess and of Madame de Richeville. How do I know? You have been a spendthrift. This man has a princely fortune. Perhaps you are under obligations to him."

"And you dare suppose, that for so wretched a motive, I would condescend to affect a friendship I did not feel?" exclaimed the enraged M. de Lancry.

"I believe that, dependent as you are upon the opinion of the world, you would submit to the greatest sacrifices, to make a figure there."

"Madam! madam!" cried Gontran, with suppressed rage.

"You are willing to occasion me the most painful sensations, rather than to pass, in the eyes of the world, for a man who is enamored of his wife! Why, then, should you not be willing to pass for the friend of Monsieur Lugarto—to submit to his pernicious influence, rather than to renounce, perhaps, some portion of the style which surrounbs us?"

"Madam! madam! beware!"

My dear, do not take this for a reproach. You have been accustomed, for a very long time, to let your happiness depend on this brilliant display; perhaps you imagine, that even I should be unable to renounce it without pain. How much are you deceived! Of what consequence is this luxury to me? I hate it, if it causes you the least regret. This luxury had no part in that divine bliss, which lasted so short a time for us—which, perhaps, would have lasted still, but for the arrival of this man. How much do we require, to live obscurely in some unknown corner—you, myself, and my poor Blondeau? And such a life! would it not be my ideal dream? Until my marriage, did I not live in solitude, far from these pleasures—which, for me, are weariness—because my heart takes no part in them? My friend, you are moved, I perceive. Ah! for pity's sake, listen to her who thinks only of your happiness, which she would purchase at the cost of her whole life. Gontran, on my knees—on my knees I beseech you, conceal nothing from me! Confide in me! Put my love to the proof! Seek, then, a retreat, a consolation, and see if it fails you."

I clung to the knees of Gontran. His head resting on his breast, his eyes fixed, he seemed profoundly absorbed. Without making me any reply, he uttered a long sigh, and buried his face in his hands.

"Ah! I see! I see!" cried I, almost with joy, "I am not mistaken! Courage, my love! courage! Come, I will admit what is impossible. Suppose that, to free yourself from this man, we should ruin ourselves completely: have we not Ursula, my friend, left? Good Heavens! I shall go to her with the same confidence, and the same pleasure, that she would have recourse to me. When people love as we love each other—for you love me, in spite of your flirtations with this beautiful princess—are there any dark days? Remember, then, that affecting story, which you told me so charmingly at the opera. Well! we will do as did those noble—those courageous young persons."

Gontran drew himself up hastily, and said to me, with bitter irony: "Truly! you sketch the picture of a very enviable existence, and one which might well make amends for the loss of a large fortune! A beautiful life that! I am a fool, to listen to your dreams. Once for all: you will oblige me by not recurring to this matter. Your suspicions are senseless. I am under no obligation to Lugarto. He once rendered me a service: but not a pecuniary one, in the remotest degree. I am surprised that, with the romantic extravagance of your notions, you do not understand, that gratitude alone has the power to create the indissoluble ties of ardent friendship. In short, let me tell you, that your jealousy is ridiculous! that your suspicions, in relation to Lugarto, are absurd, and that I am old enough to know how to take care of myself in the world; and that you had better, for the peace of mind of both of us, take life as it is. You understand me!"

The turn my mind took was extraordinary. I went rapidly through this train of reasoning. What I seek is the happiness of Gontran. My own happiness should be considered only as a means of attaining this object. If, in sacrificing myself, I secure to him tranquillity—happiness, I ought not to hesitate. Whatever it may cost, I will comply with his wishes. I am still at a loss to understand, how I resigned myself so abruptly to an extremity, which contrasted so strongly with the complaints I had just made to Gontran. At present, it seems to me as if the sudden alteration was something like that desperate resolution, which one embraces, with the rapidity of thought, in mortal perils.

"I understand you, Gontran," said I to him, "and I will obey you. My complaints annoy you; I will complain no more. It would be troublesome to you to have me to attend to in society. I will ask it of you no longer. You will find diversion in the attentions you pay the princess. I shall reproach you no more on this subject. It gives you pain to find that I do not understand the sentiment which unites you and M. Lugarto. I will do my best to overcome the aversion with which this man inspires me. Only," added I, unable to repress my tears, "there is a favor which I implore of you. Permit me to go into society as little as possible. I cannot overcome this coldness you reproach me with. In spite of myself, my mind revolts at the idea of accepting the attentions of any one but yourself, if they are ever so insignificant. This is, perhaps, weakness, childishness—I confess it—but be generous, forgive me for it. In every other respect I will do all that you ask. Tell me, are you satisfied? Do you forgive the irritation I have occasioned you?" said I, trying to smile through my tears.

"Poor Matilda!" said Gontran, with an emotion which he could not subdue. "One must be made of bronze to withstand so much sweetness, so much goodness. Perhaps it is I who am in the wrong."

"No! no!" said I, innterrupting; "all that I wanted was to discover, by experiment, what pleased or displeased you: you are right—I was insane. But you must not blame me for it. You see I was unacquainted with your wishes. But reassure yourself, my love; believe me, this lesson shall not be lost upon me. Now and for ever, tell me frankly, explicitly, your wishes. I will resign myself to them. But still, tell me if. in spite of all my efforts, I cannat, sometimes—oh! but very seldom—if I cannot succeed in obeying you—if you are satisfied that it has been beyond my strength—tell me; you will be good, you will be indulgent!—you will not scold me?"

Gontran looked at me with surprise, almost with uneasiness. He seized my hand abruptly—he found it icy cold. Indeed, I felt faint. I had made a desperate resolution. It was not the resolution to keep my promise which failed me; it was the physical strength necessary for this cruel scene. Had not my husband supported me in his arms, I should have fallen. I suffered a sort of painful swimming of the brain. In the evening a burning fever seized me, and for several days I was seriously ill.

CHAPTER X.

THE NOTE.

REMAINED several days quite unwell; but nevertheless, except our days of seclusion at Chantilly, I reckoned these among the happiest of my life Gontran remained with me, and lavished on me the tenderest attentions My thoughts were sad, but of a sadness not unmixed with pleasure. Sometimes I asked myself, of what use life would be to me henceforth? I was afraid I had exhausted all the happiness which I had a right to expect. Then sincerely, without any affectation, I prayed to God to withdraw me from this world; then death would have appeared almost beautiful. My husband had become affectionate again, and as attentive as ever. He regretted the pain he had given me. He did not leave my side. I was delivered from the presence of M. Lugarto. My happiness was so great, that I forgot the torments which had occasioned my illness. I almost dreaded the return of health, lest the precious attentions of Gontran should cease; for in proportion as my sufferings were relieved, he became less assiduous.

While I was contending with these alternations, I marked out for myself a line of conduct, from which I promised faithfully never to swerve. It was one, in every respect, in conformity with the last resolve I had made. It would be untrue to say that this resolve did not cost me much. But there is, in every sacrifice which we make to love, a profound satisfaction which increases, as it were, in proportion to the very extent of the sacrifice to which we submit.

On the very day after that on which I went out for the first time, Blondeau came into my apartment. She brought me the list of the persons who had been to inquire after my health, and to have their names inscribed at the porter's lodge, during my illness. The Princess de Ksernika, M. de Rochegune, M. Lugarto, were on this list. Mademoiselle de Maran had also sent to my house, but did not come herself to see me. Never in her life had she been near the house of a person who was ill; for she had the whim of believing every disease contagious. I was astonished not to find on the list, the name of Madame de Richeville. My dislike to her had, in a measure, disappeared. Not that I had recognized the truth of her predictions on the subject of Gontran; for one of the symptoms of love is a complete blindness. But the charm of her manners attracted me in spite of myself, and I no longer entertained any doubt as to the interest which she took in me.

"Madam de Richeville has not sent to inquire how I was?" I asked Blondeau.

"No, madam. But——"

I saw, by the expression of Blondeau, that she had something to say to me on the subject of this list, and that she hesitated.

"What is the matter? You appear to be embarrassed!"

"Because, I fear, madam, I shall alarm you."

"Has it any thing to do with M. de Lancry?" replied I.

"No, no: madam. It is an extraordinary adventure which has taken place during your illness. I should not have mentioned it to you, if it did not concern, indirectly to be sure, the excellent M. de Mortagne."

"Tell it me quick, then!"

"Well, then, madam. On the day after that on which you were taken ill, in the evening, while you were sunk to sleep, I descended a moment to the servants hall. M. Rene, your valet de chambre, had just given notice that he was about to leave the house."

"True," said I to Blondeau, "remembering that I had seen in the morning a new servant, whose face had struck me; for it seemed to me that I knew it before. Do you know the reason why Rene has left my service?

"To return to his own country in Lorraine, he told me."

"And the man who has taken his place, where does he come from?"

"He was with some English people. He understands his business. He appears to be an excellent man, and very intelligent. But, madam, this has nothing to do with our adventure, as you will see. In the evening then, some one came and told me that I was inquired for at the door of the hotel, and put into my hand a note, in which was written these words, in the handwriting of M. de Mortange, which I should recognize among a thousand.

'*My good Madame Blondeau—Place implicit confidence in the person who will deliver you this note. He will tell you what I wish of you. I have heard of the illness of Matilda. I depend upon hearing from her through you every day.*
MORTAGNE.'

" As you may imagine, I did not hesitate for an instant. I went immediately down to the door. I found a hack; the door was ajar. In this carriage was a man, whose features the darkness did not permit me to distinguish. He said, in a tone of emotion, (I could recognize the voice,) 'Madame Blondeau, I come on behalf of M. de Mortagne, to inquire after the Viscountess de Lancry.' 'She is very unwell,' said I to the stranger. The physicians fear a bad night!' 'You will not be surprised at the mysterious manner in which M. de Mortagne inquires, through me, about the state of her health,' added he, 'when you have learnt that for your mistress's sake, the name of M. de Mortagne must not be pronounced in her house.' You had not concealed from me," added Blondeau, "the afflicting scene of your marriage contract. It seemed to me very natural that M. de Mortagne should make his inquiries in an indirect manner, and for another reason, also—he was not then in Paris."

" Where, then, is he?" said I to Blondeau.

" This same stranger added, that Monsieur de Montagne was absent from Paris, in consequence of some business of importance in which you were interested; and that to conduct it successfully, it was necessary for him to surround himself with the greatest mystery."

" What can be the meaning of this?"

" I do not know, madam. At any rate, it is certain that this stranger observed to me, that he could not continue to ask for me at the door, without exciting the curiosity of the servants, which would be indiscreet; and that, to have frequent and exact information of the state of your health, he begged me, in behalf of Monsieur de Mortagne, to place every day under a large stone at the garden-railing, on the side of the Champs-Elysees, a sort of bulletin, and that he would come and get it in the evening—the spot being at night entirely unfrequented; that if I could come sometimes myself, he should, on behalf of Monsieur de Mortagne, feel very gratefnl, because he could in this way obtain more minute information. He added, that Monsieur de Mortagne had thought of sending a servant, in the usual manner, to make inquiries, but that this unsatisfactory information would not satisfy his anxiety. He told me finally, that he had also thought of asking me to write him by the post under an assumed name, but that this plan was the most dangerous of all."

" And why so dangerous?"

" I do not understand why, madam. He explained himself no farther. He enjoined upon me to tell you, once for all, that if you had occasion, in any matter of importance, to write to Monsieur de Mortagne, you must send your letters to no other person but Madame de Richeville herself who would forward them."

" This is strange!" said I to Blondeau. " And what did you do?"

" Exactly what I was requested to do by Monsieur de Mortagne. I wrote a bulletin of your health. Under pretence of taking a walk in the garden before commencing my watch, every evening I placed my letter under the railing. and the stranger came and took it. The day on which you were so very ill, I wrote a few hurried words, and carried them as usual. The next day, I could not get out untl quite late, while you were sleeping. I had better news to give—I was perfectly happy. I wrote a word or two for Monsieur de Mortagne, I ran to the grating: the night was dark. The stranger heard me doubtless, for he addressed me in a low tone, 'Madame Blondeau, is it you?' 'Yes, sir.' said I. 'In the name of Heaven! how is she?' cried he, in a voice which struck me as singularly changed. 'Better, much better tell Monsieur de Mortagne,' answered I. 'I have this moment come out for the first time from the poor lady's chamber since yesterday, and I bring you a word of news.' I believe, that on learning this good news, the stranger fell on his knees, for his voice seemed to me a little more hushed as I thought, and I heard these words pronounced as if by a person praying: 'My God! my God! Blessed be thy name! she will live! she will live;' 'I am going back immediately to my mistress,' said I to the stranger; 'do not let Monsieur de Mortagne be alarmed.' 'Be assured, my good Madame Blondeau, he shall not wait long for this happy news.' I was on my way back to the house, when it seemed to me that I heard, in the direction of the iron fence, something like suppressed cries—the noise of a struggle—a dead sound, like that of a heavy body falling on the ground."

"You frighten me. What next ?"

"I listened again ; I heard nothing. Alarmed, I returned again toward the railing. I listened again. Still nothing. I called in a low tone. No one answered. I thought I had been mistaken : I went into the house."

"And the next morning ?" said I to Blondeau.

"The next day, at dusk, I carried my note to the usual place. I waited a long time : no one came. I supposed that Monsieur de Mortagne's messenger could not come any sooner. I went back to the house promising myself to go at dawn of day, and see if the note had been as usual taken away."

"Well ?"

"Well, madam ! the next morning I found it still there. No one had come for it. No madam—but what is more nnfortunate still—what alarms me——"

"But speak out !" cried I, observing that Madame Blondeau hesitated.

"Ah ! madam !" resumed she, clasping her hands, "judge of my horror, when I observed near the railing, quite a large spot of blood !"

"Ah ! this is horrible ! And the note—the note ?"

"I left it there still, to see if anybody would come for it. In vain. It was only yesterday, that I took it away. For ten days, no one has been to get the note. It appears then, unfortunately to be true, that it was M. de Mortagne's messenger who uttered the cry which I heard !"

"Alas ! it strikes me as only too probable. And you are sure that you heard a cry, and something like the falling of a body ?" said I to Blondeau.

"Yes, yes, madam ! and these traces of blood, prove but too well that I was not mistaken !"

"Listen, Blondeau. M. de Mortagne lives opposite this hotel. You must go, this evening, and inquire if he is in Paris. If not there, I shall go tomorrow to Madame de Richeville ; for I am cruelly anxious. As soou as M. de Lancry comes in, I will disclose to him the whole story in order that he may unite his efforts with mine, to clear up the mystery."

"Madam," said Blondeau, interrupting me, "permit me to observe to you, that it may not perhaps, be prudent to speak of this matter to the viscount. You know, he detests M. de Mortagne ; and the stranger informed me that the latter was engaged in business of importance in which you were interested. Alas ! madam, you are now happy ;" added this excellent woman, looking at me with tears in her eyes. "But who knows—perhaps the day may come, when you will need the protection of Monsieur de Mortagne. Would it not be better to speak of this to no one, for fear of making public something which might attrect attention to Monsieur de Mortagne ; and thus, perhaps, interfere with his plans, by interrupting the secrecy with which he judges it necessary to surround himself ? Why should you inform the viscount of this ? After all I have acted without your knowledge. If any one is wrong, it is I. And besides, what harm could there be in sending news of you to one of your relations, and the only one who entertains a sincere affection for you ?"

In spite of the repugnance I felt to conceal anything from Gontran, I agreed with Blondeau. My uneasiness on the subject of Monsieur Lugarto's influence over my husband, was as great as before my illness. This man still inspired me with the utmost terror. I thought, that some day both Gontran and myself would be obliged to claim the protection of Monsieur de Mortagne. I imagined, that the mysterious conduct of the latter was inended to frustate, or to penetrate, the malicious designs of Monsieur Lugarto. In this point of view, the disappearance of the messinger of Monsieur de Mortagne, awakened my fears.

In the midst of these anxieties, Monsieur de Rochegune was announced. I gave orders to beg him to wait an instant. I gave some directions to Blondeau, and immediately went in to Monsieur de Rochegune ; thanking Providence, which had thus given me an opportunity of hearing from Monsieur de Mortagne—for I was aware of their intimacy.

CHAPTER XI.

THE INTERVIEW.

MONSIEUR DE ROCHGUNE struck me as very pale. His manner was sadder than usual.

"As soon, madam, as I learned that you received," said he, "I hastened to present myself, to acquit me of a commission from a friend of mine, who would be too happy to consider herself as one of yours."

"Of whom are you speaking?"

"Of the Duchess de Richeville. Obliged to leave Paris suddenly for Anjou—it was only there that she heard of your illness, and then through me. She begged me to communicate to you all her wishes for your speedy recovery. It will therefore be a consolation to her, to be informed of your convalescence."

"A consolation! has any disagreeable circumstance occurred to her?"

"I fear so. She left suddenly, writing me, that an unexpected misfortune obliged her to leave Paris; that she was unacquainted with the full extent of the blow which had fallen upon her. Her last letter leaves me still in the same uncertainty, as she only wrote to me to beg me to be the interpreter of her sentiments to you."

Instinctively, I recalled the sort of mysterious threat which M. Lugarto had made to Madame de Richeville. A presentiment told me, that this man was no stranger to the misfortune which had driven the Duchess away from Paris.

"There is another person in whom I take a lively interest," said I to Monsieur de Rochegune; "and who is also one of your friends. Monsieur de Mortagne."

"He has been absent from Paris for several days. He was still much indisposed when he left; for he requires great care, for some time, to restore him to health, which has been so severely attacked."

"Do you know where Monsieur de Mortagne is?"

"No: I regret that I do not, and so much the more that I am, myself, on the point of leaving France; perhaps, for a very long time. Before my departure I should be pleased to have permission to come and receive your orders, in case you have any commission to give me for Naples before I embark.'.

"You are very obliging, sir; but I have no occasion to take advantage of your kindness."

M. de Rochegune remained silent for some moments, with an air of embarrassment. Twice he raised his eyes toward me, then cast them on the ground. At length, with considerable hesitation, he observed with an air of gravity, and even of solemnity:

"Madam, do you believe me to be a man of honour?"

I looked at Monsieur de Rochegune with astonishment.

"You are the friend of Monsieur de Mortagne," said I, "and I happen to have had an opportunity of convincing myself that you are worthy of his friendship. Here in this house, the scene of gratitude to which I was witness——"

"Do me the favor, madam, as an act of kindness, to allow me to forget that occasion. Too many bitter recollections are associated with it, for my feelings. I have asked you, whether you consider me a man of honour? because it is necessary that I should be perfectly well assured of your confidence—, Iwho am unknown to you; I, whom perhaps you will never see again; thatI may have the courage to say to you what I must."

"Sir, I feel sure that I may listen to you without any hesitation.

"I shall then speak with sincerity, madam. One single word only first. Believe me, the man, to whom you do the favor to give credit for some nobleness of heart, is incapable of dissimulation. Were you unacquainted with some of the former circumstances of my life, perhaps the step which I am about to risk, might appear to you offensive and incomprehensible. Permit me, therefore, to go into a few details."

"I listen!"

Monsieur de Rochegune, before proceeding, seemed to collect himself. His countenance, of which the expression is soft and melancholy, became pensive. He continued, in a voice which was slightly affected by his emotion, in spite of the efforts he made to overcome it.

"It was a favorite project, both of Monsieur de Mortagne, and of my father, to obtain your hand in marriage for myself, madam."

"Of what use is it, sir, to recall those events! I entreat you——"

"Forgive me, madam, of speaking to you of past events—of projects which have little interest for you; but, as I have already had the honor to declare to you, it is indispensable. I had often heard M. de Mortagne—before his fatal voyage to Italy—observe to my father, how unfortunate your childhood had been; notwithstanding the excellent qualities, which had developed themselves in you. The narration of the unkind treatment, to which Mademoiselle de Maran subjected you, has a thousand times excited the indignation of my father. I was then very young, but I never shall forget the interest with which your situation inspired me. Up to that time

I had lived with my father, on one of his estates—which is equivalent to saying, that I had constantly before my eyes an example of the noblest virtues. In hearing M. de Mortagne relate some anecdotes of Mademoiselle de Maran, I learned, for the first time in my life that there existed beings who were malicious and perverse. Whenever I saw M. de Mortagne, I overwhelmed him with questions concerning you. For me, modam, you were the personification of suffering and of resignation. I departed on a journey of considerable length ; and often, in thinking of my father—of France I bestowed a sad thought on the poor orphan girl, who was abandoned to the malicious caprices of a woman without pity. If you knew, madam, the invincible hatred which I have always entertained for the abuse of power —if yon knew how invariably I have always taken the part of the weak against the strong ; you would not be surprised to hear me speak thus, of the profound interest with which you even then inspired me."

"I am much obliged to you, sir, believe me."

"On my return, I found M. de Mortagne at Paris. He came to inform my father and myself of the result of the violent scene, after which your family council had left you under the care of Mademoiselle de Maran. Then, for the first time, my father disclosed to me projects never to be realized. On his return from a campaign in Greece, which I had planned with M. de Mortagne, he determined to make every effort to enlighten the opinions of your family, so as to withdraw you from the power of Mademoiselle de Maran. You have heard of the odious plot by which our friend was detained in the dungeons of Venice for several years. We supposed him to be lost to us for ever. This generous man had interested us in so lively a manner in your fate, that my father considered himself as fulfilling a sacred duty, in taking M. de Mortagne's place near you.

"What do you mean, sir ?"

"My father did everything in his power, to conciliate Mademoiselle de Maran. By a noble illusion of his generous nature, he believed that he could, by the influence of reason and virtue alone, persuade your aunt to change her conduct toward you. He had several interviews with her. He found her inflexible. I cannot describe to you, madam, the regret, the pain, he suffered. He addressed her in language, alternately threatening and suppliant. Nothing could touch her heart."

"I was never aware of this intercession. I understand now, the sort of aversion which my aunt has often expressed for your father."

"After some further travels, I lost my father, madam." M. Rochegune was silent for a moment, then stealthily wiped away a tear, and resumed: "While dying, my father enjoined upon me, in the name of the friendship which had united us with M. de Mortagne, never to lose sight of the orphan who had so many titles to the sympathy of our friend. Alas ! madam, I was reduced to forming fruitless wishes for your happiness. In vain I desired to be introduced to Mademoiselle de Maran. The name I bore, excluded me. She refused me admittance into her house. You were, at that time, about sixteen, I believe. Several times. attracted by a sort of pious curiosity, with which your position inspired me, I placed myself in your path. Your countenance wore an indescribable expression ot repressed sadness, mingled with painful resignation, which overcame me entirely. You will forgive me, will you not, for the mysterious part I assumed in your life ? The respectful sympathy which I entertained for you, was a sort of pious legacy which my father—which M. de Mortagne, our best friend, had bequeathed to my heart. Unable to make your acquaintance, I often discussed your position with Madame de Richeville. The restless and jealous watchfulness of Mademoiselle de Maran, often prevented some of my friends, and of hers, from having access to you. At the least question relative to your fate, or about her intentions in regard to you, Mademoiselle de Maran changed the conversation, or positively declined answering. A whole year passed in this manner. I received a letter from M. de Mortagne. After the most unprecedented efforts and attempts, he had succeeded in corrupting one of the keepers, and making his escape from Venice. Obliged by fatigue to stop at Marseilles, he wrote to me, to come to him as soon as possible. I hastened thither. I found him almost dead ; but occupied with one thought only, that of your fortune in life. I informed him, that Madame de Richeville, one of your friends, had in vain attempted to get admitted to you. He inquired if you were well—if you were handsome. I drew your portrait for him. A ray of happiness and of joy lighted up his ghastly face."

"Admirable friend !" exclaimed I.

"Yes, madam—you have none warmer, none more devoted. I did not again leave him. Madame de Richeville, setting, perhaps, the rules of propriety at defiance, but following the firsi dictates of her friendship, and of gratitude, which nothing can change, came and passed some time at Marseilles. M. de Mortagne was saved. As before, he continued to devote himself, above all things, to your fortune. It was then, that the plan recurred to him of the union which had been the hope and joy of my father. This hope, which I once thought it possible to realize, is enough to give me —I had almost ventured to say—the right, to beseech you to dispose for ever, of my religious devotion. M. de Mortagne, on his arrival at Paris, was to have a long interview with you. Whether Mademoiselle de Maran gave her consent, or not, he was determined to impart to you his projects. What we wish for, we believe in, madam. The mission seemed to be so beautiful—that of making you forget an unfortunate childhood and youth, —the partial friendship of M. de Mortagne, opened the future to me in so brilliant a light, that I returned to Paris, almost sharing the hopes of my friend. All of a sudden, two startling pieces of intelligence came like thunderbolts to dissipate our beautiful vision: your marriage with M. de Lancry was settled, and M. de Mortagne, too eager to commence his journey, had suffered a dangerous relapse at Lyons. His life was almost despaired of. I hastened to him. The news I announced to him aggravated his illness to such an extent, that he was seized with a burniug fever. This lasted about a month. Business of importance obliged me to precede him to Paris. He arrived there the evening before your marriage: as for myself, renouncing a hope so long cherished, I determined to travel. I offered this house for sale, at the very time when I had the honor to entertain you there, with M. de Lancry and Mademoiselle de Maran."

"Allow me a question, sir. Are you aware of the step which Madame de Richeville took, in relation to me, before my marriage?"

M. de Rochegune looked at me with surprise; and replied, in a tone of the greatest sincerity, "I do not know, madam, to what step you refer."

"Have the goodness to continue, sir," said I to M. de Rochegune.

I thought, with agony, that he was doubtless going to speak to me of Gontran, as Madame de Richeville had done. Although the conversation of M. de Rochegune had been, thus far, full of delicacy, of moderation and of respect, I should not have allowed the slighest imputation upon M, de Lancry.

M. de Rochegune continued: "You see, madam, from this long introduction, your fate has not, for six years, ceased to occupy M. de Mortagne, my father, and myself, (wholly unknown to you, I am aware.) Does then, an interest so lively, so constant, confer upon me the right to tell you a useful truth—however painful that truth may be?"

"Sir, I know not what you may have to disclose; but if it involves any reproach of M. de Lancry, it is useless to continue this interview."

M. de Rochegune regarded me with an astonishment almost sorrowful.

"I see, madam, I have not the honor to be known by you. From the moment when you gave your hand to M. de Lancry, this choice, so honorable for him, placed him, in my eyes, among those to whom I should be happy to prove my devotion. One of the reasons which have given me the courage to come to you confidently, is, that what I have to say is of as much importance to M. de Lancry as to you."

This simple and noble language relieved me of an immense weight; but it awakened my fears in relation to Gontran.

"What information do you come to give me, sir?" I exclaimed.

After a moment's hesitation, he replied. "Do you see M. Lugarto, often, madam?"

"Yes, and I should rejoice, in spite of myself, were he not the friend of M. de Lancry."

"Do you know who this M. Lugarto is?"

"Alas! sir, I do."

"Do you know that M. Lugarto passes his whole time, at present, at the house of Mademoiselle de Maran?"

"I was not aware of it, sir; on the contrary, I have heard Mademoiselle de Maran treat him with the most merciless irony."

"Doubtless, Mademoiselle de Maran treated him in this way, until she discovered that you had not an enemy more dangerous than this man.'

It could not but be so," said I, smiling bitterly; "my aunt almost gave me warning of this new perfidy."

"But, madam, you do not know all the baseness, all the treachery, of this new plot of Mademoiselle de Maran; you do not know the disgraceful countenance which she lends, by her conversation, to the infamous calumnies of Monsieur Lugarto."

"What calumnies, sir? Can any attention be paid to what is said by such a man as this? and, besides, what can he say?"

"Oh, nothing, which he cannot justify—nothing, moreover, which is not true; and it is this, which unfortunately renders his slanders more fatal. He says, that M. de Lancry is his intimate friend; and he proves it, by appearing at all times in his company and yours. He says, that every morning he sends you flowers, with which you deck yourself; and this too is true. He says, that the balls which he is about to give, he gives for you. He says, that in presence of the world, you exhibit a coldness for him; but that this coldness is an artifice to deceive your husband. He says, in short, that you love him, madam!"

I looked so stupefied at M. de Rochegune, that he supposed I had not heard him, and he continued:

"Yes, madam! Monsieur Lugarto says, that you love him?"

This accusation struck me as so disgustingly stupid, that I exclaimed, with a sardonic burst of laughter, "I love this man! But this is madness, sir! Who will ever even admit the possibility of it? Doubtless, I regret bitterly the intimacy which has grown up between him and my husband. I regret bitterly, to be the object of attentions on his part, which I dislike and detest. But never—good God!—never have I feared that these attentions, which I loathe, might be construed in this way."

M. de Rochegune looked upon me with an expression of mournful compassion. "Alas! madam," resumed he, after a silence of some length, "it is painful in me to have to convince you of a very disagreeable truth. But your peace of mind; and (shall I say it,) a regard for your honor—yes, the honor of M. de Lancry, makes it my duty to enlighten you."

"Ah! sir, speak!"

"You are very young, madam; you are proud of the nobleness, of the purity of your sentiments; you are proud of the love which you entertain, of that with which you inspire the man of your choice; you are proud, in short, of your happiness, because it is elevated, noble, and legitimate. You despise an infamous calumny. Who will believe it? you say. Listen, madam. Insterd of believing the world to be what it is—full of scandal—believing in evil, because folly and vulgarity have exactly the degree of intelligence necessary to repeat, to hawk about a slander; suppose the world to be an impartial spectator. What does it see? You, young, beautiful, inexperienced, appearing to be already almost forgotten by your husband; while he is paying the most devoted attentions to a woman, extremely fashionable, and whose reputation has been often compromised. That is not all. The friend of your husband lives in daily intimacy with you, accompanying you everywhere; such is his reputation, that he is known to be incapable of interesting himself in a woman without some selfish objet. He openly proclaims, he publishes to all eyes, the preference, (a compulsory one, I have no doubt,) which he receives from you. These unfortunate appearances are exaggerated by the jealously which a woman in your position, madam, always creates in all other women. Mademoiselle de Maran contnuing the work of malice and perfidy which she began in your infancy, plays now another part. It was against her wishes, she says, that you married M. de Lancry. She always dreaded his want of principle of which he has given a too convincing proof, in addressing himself so openly to Madame de Ksernika. Mademoiselle de Maran says, moreover, that she has represented to M. de Lancry, that he would drive you into some fatal system of reprisal—that your position is so much the more dangerous, from your seeing so often M. Lugarto; and that with the exception of a few boyish follies, she is unable to deny that this stranger is endowed with most fascinating qualities, and such as are calculated to gain the heart of a woman. This is not all, madam. Prepare yourself for a final blow, more cruel than any of the rest, because it does not attack you alone. Mademoiselle de Maran gives another reason for the regret she feels for your marriage with M. de Lancry. She asserts, that in consequence of the enormous debts contracted by your husband before your marriage, your own fortune is very much embarrassed, and that——"

"You hesitate, sir:" said I to M. de Rochegune, restraining my indignation—not against him, but against the authors of the odious plot which now unfolded itself entirely before me; "continue, continue: I am prepared to hear the whole."

"And I, madam, to disclose the whole; for, happily, I believe that I have the power to overthrow and defeat such a tissue of malicious falsehood."

"Well, sir?"

"Well, madam: your aunt has been infamous enough to assert that M. de Lancry, finding his affairs embarrassed, has had recourse to the kindness of M. de Lugarto; and that he has made himself so dependent upon this man, that he finds himself almost compelled to suffer his attentions to you."

"Oh! my God!" exclaimed I, burying my face in my hands.

"You are horror-struck, madam! Is it not an abyss of infamy and shame? You, so noble and so pure—it is with difficulty that you can comprehend such a tissue of horror. Confide, then, madam, in a man who has never been guilty of a falsehood. Such is the report which circulates about you and M. de Lancry and M. Lugarto. And it is not an idle report without echo—no, no; unfortunately, it is a conviction founded upon the most unlucky appearances. M. Lugarto has managed with the address of a demon. M. de Lancry—yourself, madam, without being aware of it, have given currency to these detestable calumnies."

I was annihilated. I was then able to explain to myself the invincible aversion, the instinctive terror, with which the attentions of M. Lugarto had always inspired me. It was then that I realized the full extent of the mischief. My suspicions concerning the nature of the obligations M. de Lancry was under to M, de Lugarto, appeared to me to be justified. In this respect, doubtless, Mademoiselle de Maran did not calumniate.

"You see, madam," said M. de Rochegune, "it required all the imperious urgency of duty—it required the absence of M. de Mortagne—to decide me to come and inflict this painful blow. At present, permit me to point out to you, what I consider the right course to be pursued in the present emergency. You must, without losing a moment, communicate the whole to M. de Lancry; that he may not doubt its truth, I beseech you, madam, to reveal to him the whole of our interview. As to the mode of putting a stop to these infamous reports—it is very simple. I have not forgotten the instructions of M. de Mortagne: above all, and before all, the *truth*, however violent it may be. This is the only way to crush perfidy and falsehood. When you shall have confided everything to M. de Lancry, neither you nor he must alter your manner, in any particular, to M. Lugarto. After a few days, have an invited party at your house; send invitations to all your acquaintances, including M. Lugarto, Mademoiselle de Maran, and myself. I will defer my departure until then; for I hope to be able to render you a service. Then, madam, on that day, openly—in the face of the whole company—I will accuse M. Lugarto and Mademoiselle de Maran of having grossly calumniated you and M. de Lancry. Mademoiselle de Maran, in spite of her audacity, M. Lugarto, in spite of his impudence, will be overwhelmed by so solemn an accusation. Then, madam, do you and M. de Lancry challenge this man and woman to repeat before you, and before all present, the disgraceful falsehood to which they have given currency; and to give the proofs of the atrocities which they have asserted. Then, madam, believe me, however prejudiced the world may be, it will be obliged to believe in the shame, in the infamy of those who, electrified by your generous indignation, can only stammer out a cowardly apology."

"Yes! yes! you are right," I exclaimed revived by the noble language and generous counsels of M. de Rochegune. "Yes! it is an inspiration of Heaven! may you, who have revealed it to us, enjoy every blessing. The truth must come forth triumphant from such an explanation. I shall do it without mercy or pity. Now, falsehood to falsehood! I will pursue these wretches, until they avow their treachery before the world, whom they have made their accomplices, and who shall be their judge."

"Excellent! excellent! madam. Then I shall depart more tranquil, more reassured, as to the future happiness of a person to whom I have made a vow of the most unchangeable devotion."

"Ah! sir; you are the worthy, the noble friend of M. de Mortagne," exclaimed I, holding out to M. de Rochegune my hand. "In the name of de Lancry—in the name of our eternal gratitude—receive the assurance of a friendship that is not less ardent than your own. By this fearless disclosure, you will have saved us from a thousand misfortunes. Oh! never can we forget it."

M. de Rochegune took, respectfully the hand which I offered him, pressed it cordially in his, and said to me with emotion:

"By the sacred memory of my mother, I have bound myself to be a brother and a most devoted friend to you! Will you accept my vow? Do you consider me worthy of this friendship?"

"It does too much honor to us both, for me not to accept it, with pride and with joy," I replied.

Some one knocked at the door. Blondeau came in.

"What do you want?" said I.

"Madam," replied she, looking at M. de Rochegune, "I have just received a letter, which I am requested to deliver to M. de Rochegune without delay.

She presented me the letter; I handed it to M. de Rochegune. He exclaimed.

"It is from M. de Mortagne. I left a message at my house for him, in case he should arrive, advising him that I was at your house. Will you allow me to read this letter? it may concern you."

I bowed my head to M. de Rochegune; he opened the letter and read it.

"Madam," said Blondeau to me, in an under-tone, pointing to M. de Rochegune; "I recognize his voice—it is he!"

"What?"

"This is the person, who came to make the inquiries, on behalf of M. de Mortagne."

"What is it you say?"

"It is as true as that there is a God in heaven! It is he, madam; I am sure I am not mistaken. It is his voice, I assure you."

While Blondeau was speaking, I examined the features of M. de Rochegune. They assumed, suddenly, an expression of deep anxiety. I could not prevent myself from exclaiming:

"What is the matter, sir? Monsieur de Mortagne!"

"I must rejoin him immediately, madam. We propose to leave Paris for some time. He has found the clue to a most abominable plot, he tells me without explaining himself farther."

"And this plot—whom does it threaten?" cried I.

"Can you ask me? You, madam! you!"

"And Gontran, my husband?"

"M. de Mortagne advises you, above all things, not to leave him. If he travel, travel with him. And, above all things, for your safety and for his never to separate from him for a single instant."

"Good God! Good God! Whom does he suspect—from whom have we so much to fear?"

"Need I tell you, madam? From M. Lugarto. The enormous fortune of this man, places immense resources at his disposal. He is as crafty as he is wicked. M. de Mortagne, to disconcert his projects, absented himself from Paris some time since."

"But, sir, you leave me in a state of insufferable anxiety!"

"Look at this letter of M. de Mortagne. He writes hastily, and informs me of some of the particulars. As long as Madame de Richeville continues absent, he will be unable to let you hear from him; for, it is only through her that he will be able to write to you. He is fearful that some of your people have been corrupted; and the least indiscretion on the subject of his plans, might cause their failure. He is obliged, therefore, to act in darkness, and silence. Adieu, madam. I leave you, much encouraged! If M. de Mortagne is of opinion that I can be of service to you, in the explanation you are going to demand, I shall do myself the honor to come and inform you. If not, persist in the plan which I have marked out for you, That alone can take the evil at the root, and confound the malicious. . . . 'But now that I think of it, in order to obviate the objection to my departure, I will write to M. de Lancry, informing him of all that I have revealed to you, and authorizing him to make use of my letter. Adieu, madam. M. de Mortagne tells me that every moment counts. Take courage! your enemies are very implacable."

"But we number two friends, who are very valuable," said I, to M. de Rochegune, "Adieu, sir! You have undertaken a noble task. May Heaven aid you!"

M. de Rochegune left me.

"It is he, madam, who was attacked and wounded; I am certain of it," said Blondeau. "Did you observe how pale he was, and the wound, which his hair hardly concealed?"

"I tell you, you are mistaken."

"Ah! madam, his voice is too soft to be forgotten."

The valet de chambre opened the door, and announced the Count Lugarto.

Blondeau left me. I was alone with that man.

CHAPTER XII.

THE DECLARATION

WHEN I saw M. Lugarto enter my drawing-room, I was on the point of retiring. But remembering the advice of M. de Rochegune, I restrained my intention. M Lugarto, contrary to his custom, had a thoughtful and embarrassed air. He must have read in my face, some of the violent emotions which agitated me, and which I had some difficulty in repressing. Seating myself near the window, I looked out upon the garden, waiting for him to commence the conversation.

After a few moments silence, he came and sat beside me, and abruptly observed; "You have been very ill. I have been anxious about you. It has occasioned me a suffering, of which you can have no idea."

"I am aware, sir, of the interest you take in me," replied I smiling bitterly.

"You still detest me, then!"

"Sir!"

"Ah, why deny it? But, what have I done?"

"I am not obliged to answer such questions, sir."

"At least, it is usual to inform people what one has against them. Since you have been at Paris, I have made every effort to be agreeable to you."

"It was trouble thrown away, sir."

"I have been very sensible of it, and, indeed, you have only returned my assiduity with contempt."

"You must have seen by that, sir, that your attentions and your assiduities were not agreeable to me."

"But why so? I ask you again. You make me no reply. Was it an insult to you, to bestow upon you attentions which every woman receives, if not with gratitude, at least with pleasure!"

I raised my eyes upward, as if to call Heaven to witness the execrable duplicity of this man. M. Lugarto made a sign of impatience. He resumed, making an effort to give to his harsh voice a soft and insinuating tone: "Come, now, let us discuss the matter; be not ill-natured, for I am still your friend, although you have hitherto done everything in your power to vex me. But I do not know how it is—I believe you have bewitched me—I, who always have a memory for the injuries I receive, and who always find the means of proving that I remember them, am unable to bear you any malice, and forgive you everything. It must be that you have over me some mysterious influence. I was, at one time, totally at a loss to understand this influence—but gradually I discovered—but you will be offended. Indeed I, who am no novice—I, who understand your sex thoroughly, for the first time in my life, hesitate to declare to you . . . Your manner is so cold, so haughty—come! if you survey me with such an expression, I cannot summon courage to speak."

I regarded M. Lugarto with a look so haughty, with an expression of contempt so withering, that, in spite of his boldness, he hesitated for a moment. But immediately blushing, at having allowed himself to be disconcerted, he resumed:

"After all, it is very stupid of me. I am informing you of nothing, but what you must long ago have guessed. Women are not blind; they are always the first to perceive the passions they inspire." Well, then, I love you!—yes, I love you passionately!"

M. de Lugarto uttered these last words in a tone of voice low, and trembling with emotion. Warned by M. de Rochegune, I anticipated this insolent declaration. My face remained unmoved. M Lugarto expected that I should receive it with a burst of indignatton. He seemed much surprised at my calmness and silence.

"Yes; I love you to idolatry!" resumed he. "I, who have hitherto had only caprices and ephemeral fancies, I feel, in your presence, a longing to attach myself for ever. If you would listen to me, we might arrange our plan of life admirably. At present, my intimacy with you is established, and we might lead a most agreeable life. But you do not answer. Does this offend you?"

"Continue, sir—continue."

"With what an air you say that! Perhaps you suppose me incapable of being for ever faithful? You are mistaken; I have enjoyed life in all its pleasures—to excess, perhaps. I shall be too happy to find repose in calm and tender attachment. My character, which I candidly admit, is often detestable, would be thereby much improved. Truly, I am sure, if you were only willing to take the trouble, you might make me a much better man. Come now, try: what harm will it do you? I will love you so sincerely. Ah! you do not know what it is to be beloved by a man, who despises all other men. You can do whatever you please with me, and it will be said everywhere, what power Madame de Lancry has: She has succeeded in attaching, in softening, and in rendering pliant, the most indomitable temper in the world."

If I had not perceived, by the sinking of my heart, that I had reached a fatal crisis in my life, and that a great danger rolled heavily over Gontran and myself, the incredible vanity of this man, his cynical infatuation—which was ridiculous, almost to the degree of being loathsome—would only have excited in me a smile of pity; but I was a prey to the most cruel presentiments. M. Lugarto filled me with dread. It seemed to me that, notwithstanding his gross impudence, he would not have presumed thus to address me, unless he had supposed that he could do so with impunity. It was for reason, that I said to him, clasping my hands with affright:

"What has happened, sir, that you dare to address this language to me?"

"The language I use is, nevertheless, very plain. Mon Dieu: do not be alarmed. I am not exacting. All I demand of you is a little encouragement for the future, and a little confidence for the present. Suffer yourself to be beloved, and leave the rest to me. Only be indulgent enough to promise me, not to struggle against any sentiment which may be awakened in your heart in my favor. Come, now, confess that I have in your eyes the air of a conceited puppy, in addressing you in this strain. I will bet that you are shocked. You are mistaken. Mine is the language of true love. A man who loves sincerely, always feels sure of having his passion returned, sooner or later. What a strange creature you are: Soften this mask of refinement: After all, what is it which I ask you to do? Only to allow yourself to be happy. You will see—you will see. At least, answer me—at least . . . Matilda:"

Calling me by this name, M. de Lugarto approached me, and would have taken my hand. I listened to this ignoble language, and it seemed to me that I was in a dream. I was before aware of this man's impudence, and I asked myself, whether I had not unconsciously deserved the humiliation I suffered. I considered myself heavily punished, for not having shown M. Lugarto plainly enough the aversion I felt for him. But when he attempted to take my hand, shame, resentment, fear, all exasperated me. I rose abruptly:

"Leave me, sir! leave me!" I exclaimed. "Disgust and contempt will sometimes become too strong to be repressed, in spite of our most violent efforts. I tell you, sir, to leave me!"

"Are you, then, without any pity—without any pity?" exclaimed M. Lugarto. "Is it an insult to love you? for I love you. I swear to you, that I love you. If thus far I have shocked you—I implore your forgiveness; it is the effect of my bad education. Besides, I have never been accustomed to meet such women as you. I have been spoilt. I confess my manners are bad. With one single word—with one single look of affection, you might change me entirely. It would have been so delightful to obey you! And, besides, I did not know what to think. Seeing you so indifferent to my attentions, I feared you did not understand their meaning. I was at a loss for some contrivance, by which to give you to understand that it was love. Sometimes, I was tempted to fly; but I was retained. in spite of myself, by the charm which surrounds you. If you cannot entertain for me any other sentiment, have, at least, a little pity for me. Tell me what you would command me to do—tell me to remove myself far away from you, and I shall find the strength to obey. But, at least, let me have the satisfaction of knowing that I shall some day have credit for this cruel sacrifice. Answer me—for mercy's sake answer me: Nothing? nothing? not a word? Still the same look of hatred—of implacable contempt! Ah: I am very unfortunate: and yet I am an object of envy," cried M. Lugarto.

Real or affected tears rolled down his livid cheeks, and he buried his face in his hands. If I had not been informed, by M. de Rochegune, of the odious reports which this man had circulated, without being at all touched with the grief which he appeared to feel, I should have believed, at least, in its reality; but, as I could only recognize in it an insulting hypocrisy, it filled me with horror. I advanced toward the door, to leave the room. M. Lugarto perceived my intention, and placed himself before the door. I was alarmed. I returned in a hurried manner, toward the fire-place, with the intention of ringing the bell.

"Your object is to reduce me to despair," cried he, in a faltering voice, and clasping his hands with the air of a supplicant: "Ah! tell me—tell me only that you permit me to try to overcome the repugnance you feel for me—I ask nothing more;" and he fell on his knees

I pulled the bell with precipitation. Monsieur Lugarto stood up.

"Ah! Be it so," cried he, turning suddenly pale with anger. "Nothing moves you—neither prayers, nor tenderness, nor humility! Be it so—I will employ other means. On your knees—on your knees, proud woman, you shall beg me to have pity on you."

There was such an expression of confidence and of malice in the tone of his voice, that I trembled with fear. A footman entered:

"Tell my people they may go," said M. Lugarto with the most perfect coolness, and before I had time to utter a single word.

Nothing appeared more natural than this order. The footman went out. I was so astounded, that I did not dare to detain him. M. Lugarto, who for a moment had restrained his anger, now lost all control over himself. He became hideous. His eyes were blood-shot. His whole frame trembled convulsively, and his colorless lips contracted with a sort of nervous vibration. I was unable to move a step, and waited with anxiety for some horrible disclosure.

"Ah! then you are prepared to engage in a struggle with me. But do you know my power? You saw how, with a single word, I put down that insolent princess. As for your beautiful duchess, you do not know with what tears of blood she atones, to this very hour, for her impertinent interference with my affairs. You do not know that if I chose—understand me—if I chose, with a single word I could make you sink upon the ground with terror. Ah! you imagine that a man of my character, whatever may be his wish, ever wishes in vain. Ah! you suppose that I do not know how to revenge myself upon those who outrage me with insult and contempt. I shall not pay back contempt with contempt, and insult with insult. I should be a simpleton. Know, then, that—thanks to myself and to your aunt, whom I have found means of enlisting on my side—your reputation is already ruined; and, whatever you may do, the blow we have inflicted upon it is incurable. The world judges, condemns, and brands with eternal infamy, for a thousand times more trifling things than this. Learn, then, that it was to complete the probability of my calumnies, and to render them certain, that the princess, at my will, made advances to your husband; and that he again, at my will, is unfaithful to you. This is a fact, believed in by everybody; and the world thinks, that you revenge yourself on your husband by your intimacy with me. And now, I defy you to destroy these reports and these appearances! Whether you will or not, I shall always be on the spot—always near you. My presence fills you with fear, with horror. So much the better. You have only one way to rid yourself of my persecution. I am satisfied with easy conquests. I prefer to triumph by terror rather than by love. From this time forth I look upon you as a suppliant merely—heart-broken—your beautiful eyes swimming with tears. So much the better—you will be only the more charming!"

As he pronounced these accursed words, his glassy eyes seemed to glitter with savage ferocity. For some moments, I had been listening to him mechanically, as if I were the sport of some frightful dream—suddenly, I heard a noise in the apartment of my husband. It was his walk; he was coming toward the drawing room. I clasped my hands, exclaiming, "it is he!"

M. Lugarto looked at me with astonishment.

The door opened.

Monsieur de Lancry entered.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE DEFIANCE.

My first impulse on the entry of Gontran was to rush to meet him, and to exclaim,

"Save me: Save me:"

My disordered countenance struck Gontran. Looking at Monsieur Lugarto, he exclaimed,

"What is the matter, Matilda? in the name of Heaven: what is the matter?"

M. Lugarto began to laugh violently; and said to M. de Lancry, "Upon my word—do you know, my dear fellow, that your wife is a most extraordinary person? She is one of those who take seriously, what was only meant for a practical joke."

"You are a villain:" cried I, "and I shall deal with you without reserve. In informing my husband of your conduct, I do not expose his life; you would not dare to fight with him, and he would not condescend to fight with you."

"You see how she treats me," said Monsieur Lugarto to M. de Lancry. "Confess, that I have an excellent temper."

"A truce to jesting, sir," said Gontran. "I see by her agitation, by her paleness, that Madame de Lancry is fearfully disturbed. However great my friendship for you may be, I cannot allow you to be wanting in a proper respect for my wife."

"You take it in this way, my dear fellow? That alters the case," said Monsieur Lugarto. "Let us speak of it no more. Let us speak of it no more. Let us forget this folly, and think of other matters. What are your plans for the evening?"

"You hear him!" said I: "this man asks you to overlook his crime, that he may betray you once more. No: no: Noble and generous Gontran, however much your noble and generous heart may suffer from the disclosure, I shall tell you all. The mask must be torn from this man whom you consider your friend. Here, in his presence, you must learn the infamous reports which he circulates on your account and mine: You must know that here, only a moment ago, he declared to me his infamous love:—not in a vain and empty gallantry—it is false: No: no: He spoke first of his love as a suppliant, with tears in his eyes, and a voice smooth and full of hypocrisy."

"Sir:" cried Gontran, turning purple with rage, and casting a look of fury at Monsieur Lugarto.

"But hear her out, my dear follow: I tell you, that her indignation is entirely throw away, and that she is making a serious matter of what was meant for a jest."

"And when he found that I treated his declaration with contempt and disgust, then followed threats of vengeance and the most horrible confessions. 'The world believed you, Gontran,' he said, 'to be unfaithful to me' 'The world,' he said, 'believed that I revenged myself for your desertion, by an intrigue with him!' Is that what you said? Is that what you said, sir?"

Monsieur Lugarto smiled, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Monsieur Lugarto, take care!" said Gontran, in a hoarse voice. "Human patience has its limits; and it is now a long time—a very long time, let me tell you—that my patience has endured."

Monsieur Lugarto looked down, but said nothing.

Emboldened by his air of confusion, and hoping to get rid of him for ever by means of this fearful scene, I continued:

"But this is not all: he has leagued himself with our bitterest enemy—with Mademoiselle de Maran—to publish everywhere, that you, my noble Gontran, endured his presence while you cursed him in your heart! and that you endured his attentions to me, because—imagine why? because our fortune was involved in debt, and that you had resource for aid to this man."

I was for a moment frightened by the expression of rage which flashed in the face of Gontran.

He got up and seized Monsieur Lugarto by the arm, and said to him in a voice of thunder,

"Do you hear, sir, what my wife says?—Do you hear?"

"At last, good God! at last we shall get rid of the demon," said I, clasping my hands.

Monsieur Lugarto had remained sitting.

When Gontran came near him, he did not make the slightest motion. He extricated himself calmly from the grasp of Gontran, looked at him steadily, and said, with a sardonic calmness which filled me with consternation,

"Come, now—my dear fellow! are you mad?"

"I tell you, sir, that these reports that you have circulated, are infamous! and that I will not allow——"

"You will not allow," slowly articulated Monsieur Lugarto, bursting into a loud laugh. "Ha! ha; ha! He is charming—on my word—he will not allow! Come, now: Perhaps you meant to threaten me, my lord Viscount de Lancry,"

"Yes: yes: Whatever may be the consequences, this time, at least, I——"

"Whatever the consequences may be, viscount!" cried Monsieur Lugarto, in a shrill voice, interrupting my husband. "Whatever the consequences may be? Come, now, repeat that:"

The agony of Gontran was indescrible. His handsome face became contorted, and expressed rage, hatred and despair: But it seemed, as if some mysterious influence prevented the expression of these sentiments.

They, nevertheless, found utterance.—Stamping with his foot, Monsieur de Lancry exclaimed:

"Well, then: yes: Since you drive me to extremity—yes: whatever may be the consequences, I will insult you—I will insult you—do you understand? in the face of the whole world. We will fight; and I will kill you, or you me. There is no longer room enough in the world for both of us. Life, on these conditions, is insupportable to me: If it were not for fear of affording you an infernal pleasure, I should long ago have rid myself of a life which I detest."

These words of Gontran were so full of despair—they threatened me with a new calamity of so terrible a nature, that I nearly fainted.

"You will not insult me, and I shall not fight you;" coldly replied Monsieur Lugarto. "As Madame observes—in the first place I should not dare; in the second place, you would not condescend. . . . But to revert to your '*whatever the consequences may be*'—is that a defiance, hey, viscount! Are you willing that this very instant, and in Madam's presence, I should reveal?"

"Stop, oh: Stop: Not one word more:" cried Gontran with difficulty—"for pity's sake—not a syllable:"

He fell back into his chair—covered his eyes with his hands and exclaimed with a choking voice—

"Great God: Great God:"

I was stupefied.

"Come now—I have taken a great deal of pains to convince you, my dear and intimate friend, that, after all, I am not the demon which I pass for," Monsieur Lugarto. "What is it I ask? Only to be allowed to live in peace with you and your wife and to realize the equilateral triangle of the Italians—in all honour, be it understood, for you are a terribly jealous fellow—a perfect Othello. Let us hear now what it is that you have to complain of. I make love to your wife—admitted. Of what consequence is that to you? She is virtuous: she adores you and she detests me. Here are three reasons in one to tranquillize you; a sort of three headed Cerberus which sufficiently protects your conjugal honor. But, you say, 'The world gossips and supposes you to be perfectly successful with my wife.' Ah, good heaven: let the world gossip—are you not sure of the fidelity of your wife? Come, Viscount, have a little philosophy, and do not trouble yourself about a few idle words. But the report, though false, is very annoying, you will say. That is possible. But of two evils, you know, one mnst chose the least. And, since what people says annoys you, imagine what they would say were I to gossip about certain things you wot of! If I were to tell how at London—'"

"Sir—sir," cried Gontran, in a tone of supplication,

M. Lugarto turned toward me, with an ironical expression of countenance.

"Here now, you see, is your brilliant giant-killer as supple as a glove. Give him some good advice—you, who are virtue itself—tell him to be reasonable. Come now, I am going to conclude in the vein of a traitor in a melodrama. Viscount de Lancry you are in my power. You can escape only either by assassinating me or by killing yourself. Now I am sure you are much too well tried to have recourse to any such expedient. This settled; let us proceed. Come, my dear fellow, forget these reveries of your wife, and let us live all three of us in the sweetest intimacy, as heretofore. Let the world talk, and let us enjoy life, for it is short enough. However, as I cannot allow myself to be insulted with impunity—as I am bent on having my revenge on this dear creature Matilda, I will punish her: and I condemn her to come with you this very day to celebrate her convalescence. The party shall be small—the Princess de Ksernika and three or four men and women of our acquaintance. This I mean seriously, my dear fellow; do you understand? IT MUST BE SO. Madame de Lancry will affect a little reluctance; but I leave it to you to overcome the scruples of my dear enemy. You will not be at a loss for the most excellent arguments I am sure."

I regarded Gontran with stupefaction. He did not utter a word. His eyes were motionless—his head was bowed upon his breast.

M. Lugarto rose from his chair, and added: "Tell me now, my friends.

is not this a whimsical scene ? Who would imagine, just at the present moment that in one of the finest houses in the Faubourg St. Honore, in a fine summer's day, one of the incredible scenes was being enacted which would make a novelist's fortune ? Such, however, is the fact. Fashionable life is not after all so brosaic as it is generally supposed. Well then, we shall meet soon. We dine at seven o'clock. You will have the trial of a new cook. I had him from the prince Talleyrand. They say he is a wonderful fellow. And, now it occurs to me, dismiss your carriage at dinner. We will go to Tivoli. There is to be a charming ball there. It is said the Duchess of Berry is to be present. I count a great deal on appearing there with your wife and yourself and your charming princess, you faithless monster. It is a bargain. I will take you home, and on our way we will take some ice at Tortoni's. You see now that I am bent in the most determined manner on compromising Matilda, and I make an excellent use of my theatre I think. Now, my friend, you understand all this ? hey !

"Yes, sir," said Gontran in a low tone.

"I count, then, on you and on my fair enemy. Answer me, then. I told you that was my wish. That is enough, I think."

"Madam de Lancry and myself will come and dine with you to-day, sir," replied Gontran with an accent of despair.

Monsieur Lugarto, as he went out gave me a look of infernal triumph.

CHAPTER XIV.

AN EXPLANATION.

After M. Lugarto's departure, neither Gontran and myself had the courage to utter a single word. I fell into an abyss of gloomy reflections. It was true then. A mysterious, a terrible secret had placed M. de Lancry in the power of M. Lugarto. For the first time, my husband had spoke of suicide. So horrible a thought had never occured to me ! I trembled as I thought of Gontran's determination. It fell like a heavy blow upon my heart, when he exclaimed. speaking to M. Lugarto—'*I should lonб ago have killed myself but for the fear ot affording you an infernal joy,*' Alas ! and I ! He forgot, then that I should survive him. I reproached myself because I was of so little account in the life of Gontran. I upbraided myself with having, as it were, *not loved him aright.* It was not an empty humility of the heart—it was my conscience. Doubtless I had ever been devoted submissive, attentive—passionately fond—but doubtless, also, I had made an idle use of these generous sentiments ; since he could die without regretting me.

From that instant I acquired the bitter conviction, the offspring of an ardent love and of a profound mistrust of myself—*That one who is not beloved is always in fault.* I clung with all my might to the conviction, doubtless a most paradoxical one. I employed all the powers of my mind, all the energies of my heart, in trying to make the position impregnable. It enabled me to accuse myself, and to forgive Gontran. All women, who have ever loved with that sublime blindness, that magnificent annihilation of *self*, which is the essence of passion, can comprehend with what happiness one seizes on the most flimsy excuses for the cruelty of him she adores even when her own self-esteem becomes the sacrifice to this species of restoration. Now that years and misfortunes have matured my judgment, it seems to me that this persevering indulgence should be attributed to the imperious necessity we are under of justifying our choice in our own eyes, even at the expense of our dearest hopes. When I had once got into this train of mistrust of myself, I reproached myself also for not having been able to inspire Gontran with sufficient affection for me, to induce him to confide to me the unfortunate secret which M. Lugarto so fatally abused. When I observed how completely Gontran was overwhelmed. I was ready to accuse myself of a crime for having treated M. Lugarto with so much disdain in the first instance, and for not having concealed my aversion with more address, instead of irritating him. Perhaps the man would have continued harmless. I was happy, and yet almost terrified, at the suggestion. So unlimited is the force of love ! I, so haughty, particularly since I had become Gontran's—I almost regretted having behaved with indignity to the most contemptible to the most unprincipled of mankind.

I am astonished now, when I remember how long Gontran and myself remained silent after this scene. But the words of M. Lugarto proved so incontrovertibly the horrible dependence of Gontran on him, that he could not but remain for some time stunned, as it were, by the blow. M. de Lancry kept his face still buried in his hands. I approached him, trembling all over.

"My dear," said I,

"What do you want more?" cried he, in a tone of anger. He held up his face, which seemed to me as dark as night, and gave me a look which made me turn pale. "You see now the point to which your severity, your absurd prudery, have brought ús. A positive explanation! You must be satisfied now. My position in relation to Lugarto is, I hope, clear and perfectly well defined."

"What do you mean, Gontran? Was I to listen without indignation to the horrible declaration of this knave? But my honour! your honour!"

"Oh, honour! Who proposes to you to compromise your honour or mine? There is a gulf between guilt and innocent coquetry. If you had possesed a shade of penetration, you would have seen in the very first words I addressed to you on the subject of Lugarto, that he was a man to be conciliated. But, no! in spite of my most urgent warnings, you have made it a point to irritate him more than twenty times. Satiated with pleasure, malicious as he is, he takes a frightful pleasure in opposition, in resistance. A few amiable common-places on your part would have rid you of him. He is now playing the game merely out of temper. Now—now," added M. de Lancry, enraged, "he has been driven to extremity. In spite of myself, I have allowed myself to make use of abusive language. Now I have been obliged to know that he is making love to you, and I am compelled to be coward enough not to box his ears, and to accompany him and yourself every day in public. This is what you have done, madam."

"I! I!"

"Oh, yes! yes! a thousand times, yes! Since you were sure of yourself, as sure as I was, you ought to have received his attentions, at least, so far as not violently to reject them. You should have told him graciously and kindly that his attentions endangered your reputation, and that if he wished to make himself agreeable to you, he must begin by obeying you in this particular. He would have listened to you; for, so long as you did not deprive him of all hope, you would not have exasperated him. Did it belong to me to instruct you what you were to play, under such circumstances?—Ought you not to have shred with me this task, at once humiliating and ridiculous?—Had you loved me for myself, I should not have had occasion to tell you all this. It is not enough for a woman to be virtuous, and to make a parade of her virtue;" added he, smiling bitterly; "she ought never to place her husband in a position from which he cannot retreat without either dishonor or a crime.—Do you understand that, madam?"

"Good God! Gontran!"

"You were speaking of pecuniary obligation;—I would give my life if I was under none other to him—for, understand me, unfortunate woman! he holds within his hands more than my life—do you hear?—more than my life. Now do you undersiand?"

"I understand; Good God: I understand. Forgive me, Gontran—be kind. I was just thinking to myself that I had done wrong. You know that before my illness I made a vow to love you for yourself alone. This vow, I will keep it for ever, my dearest. Our position is horrible. This secret,—I do not ask you what it is;—but, in short, what are we to do?"

"Go, in the first place, to this dinner; and, in the second place, to the ball."

"Be it so. We will go—we will go. Ah: you will see how much courage I shall show. I will talk with this man without showing the least aversion. If I must, I will even smile upon him. The world may think of my conduct, what it pleases; it matters little to me, provided that I have nothing to blush for in the eyes of God, or in yours. Gontran, I have much more resolution than you imagine. Come, now, let us look our position boldly in the face. This man has it in his power to ruin you. I abhor him as much as I love you, Gontran. I am capable of concealing, I assure you, with the greatest ease, the horror with which he inspires me. But, in short, if he insists—if he should say to me, to me,—for there is nothing which this man dare not attempt—'this secret which might ruin your husband, I will publish it, unless you love me.'"

Gontran blushed with indignation, and exclaimed, "I would kill him, and myself afterward,"

"The man, then, was right, my friend. A crime or a suicide. Never mind. This is well. In any event, you shall not die alone. These are the most frightful of the alternatives which may happen to us. Now listen to me. This morning, Monsieur de Rochegune came to bid me farewell. He received, while here, a letter from Monsieur de Mortagne. Do not put on that look of anger, Gontran. Our position is sad enough, and Monsieur de Mortagne, perhaps, our only friend. He knows, I am ignorant how, that Monsieur Lugarto has fatal designs upon you and me. He has left Paris, he writes to disconcert them. He has recommended me, above all things, never to leave you, if you travel. All this is, doubtless, extremely vague; still, it is consoling to think we have friends who watch over our safety."

"Monsieur de Mortagne must do a great deal, before he will make me forget his cowardly insults," exclaimed Gontran.

"Whatever it may be necessary to do for that purpose, he will do with all his heart, be assured."

"But, in point of fact, he was right. He forewarned you that I should make you very unhappy;" said Gontran, with increasing irritation. "You cannot but acknowledge the justice of his anticipations."

"My friend," said I, trying to smile, "doubtless I entertain a warm friendship for Monsieur de Mortagne; but in this particular I must decide against him. It is not you; it is this relentless man who is the cause of my unhappiness. As long as you were free, did you not heap upon me every imaginable felicity? Before my marriage, was I not indebted to you for some happy days beaming with love and with hope?"

"And these hopes have been sadly deceived, have they not?"

"Gontran: you know, well enough, that it is not so. Did I not taste of happiness almost ideal, in our retirement at Chantilly? Who was it who came and tore us away from this Eden? This odious man: Was not his arrival the signal of our misfortunes? Do I not know that, in paying those attentions to that woman, of whom I was so jealous, you only obeyed the commands of this man? Was it not necessary to his infernal projects that you should appear to be unfaithful to me? I repeat it, Gontran, I do not accuse you."

"You are, nevertheless, still, and in spite of all, a noble and excellent creature:" said Gontran, regarding me with an air of tenderness. "Ah: cursed be the day when I listened to the advice of my uncle and your aunt: What a life I have introduced you to, unhappy child: alas: it is frightful. Sometimes I abhor myself."

Gontran rushed out of the room as he said these words.

Misfortune sometimes endows us with great decision of character.

I determined to obey the directions of Gontran, and to be affable to M. Lugarto.

Now, that I am no longer fascinated by my passion for M. de Lancry, nor impressed with the terror with which *his friend* inspired me. I am unable to conceive how I could resign myself to the disgraceful, to the humiliating concession—after the odious scene which I had gone through in the morning.

But at that time I did not hesitate: it was necessary, above all things, to gain time.

M. de Mortagne was busy on his part; perhaps he was in hopes of finding some means of rescuing Gontran from the influence of M. Lugarto,

We departed for the dinner and ball. The weather was beautiful. I remember one circumstance, trifling, to be sure, but very strange. At the corner of the avenue Marigny, our carriage was obliged to stop for a few minutes.

A beggar, with a hideous and deformed countenance, approached, and asked charity.

Gontran did not, I believe, hear him; the beggar cast upon us a look of anger, and said, with a threatening gesture, as our carriage was starting again, "These rich people are very proud—they are so happy."

Simultaneously, Gontran and myself exchanged glances, as if to protest against the accusation of happiness.

Alas! the error of the beggar, however, was excusable. He saw a young woman with a young man, in a brilliant equipage, provided with all that sort of luxury which the poor mistake for happiness, and which hides often so many sorrows, so many incurable wounds! Could this beggar guess at the sufferings with which we were overwhelmed? And this sumptuous ball, to which we were repairing, as if to a place of execution, with a repressed and vague terror! How many melancholy lessons are enveloped in those contrasts of appearances with the reality!

We arrived at M. Lugarto's house.

My despair and sadness had given way to a sort of feverish and fictitious vivacity.

M. Lugarto received us with a smile on his lips. He triumphed in the pride of his execrable villainy. His house, which I was before acquainted with, was encumbered with every imaginable splendor, but heaped and piled up without taste. In the midst of this chaos of admirable things certain marks of economy denoted the instinct of a sordid avarice. This vast and sumptuous abode, in spite of its large proportions, was completely deficient in elegance, in nobleness, and in grandeur. We found assembled there the persons whom M. Lugarto had already announced to me. From time to time, I looked at Gontran to give myself courage. M. Lugarto seemed surprised at the change in my manner to him. All that I could do was to assume toward him an air of politeness, almost gracious, with which he appeared to be more surprised than pleased. He examined me with attention, as if he almost doubted what he saw. He assumed toward me a manner of excessive amiability. Gontran was placed next to the Princess de Ksernika. Anxious and absent, he hardly replied to the coquettish advances of this woman. M. Lugarto said to me in a low tone of voice, as we left the table, "that he was the happiest of men, because I appeared to have given up my unjust prejudices against him; that he regretted bitterly his violence in the morning; but that I must excuse it, in consideration of a passion, whose vehemence he was unable to control." Alas! thought I, as I listened to him, who could have foretold, that three months after my marriage—after a union, which to my eyes appeared so full of beauty and sanctity—I should be reduced to listen to such language, without the power to express my shame, my disgust, my indignation! Oh, profanation! oh, sacrilege! A passion which I had dreamt of as so noble, so sublime, so pure!

After dinner, according to M. Lngarto's plan, we got into his carriage—he and the princess, Gontran and myself, and went to Tivoli. My torture continued. M. Lugarto offered me his arm; my husband did the same to the princess. The ball was crowded. Almost all the courtiers, whose places detained them at Paris, were present. I had been ill for some length of time. For several weeks I had not been into company. It was for this reason that certain shades of difference, in the manner with which I was received, as well as M. de Lancry, became insensibly perceptible to me. The men returned his salutations with an air of coldness or absence. Some of the women, whom he addressed, hardly answered him at all. M. Lugarto on the contrary, was received as usual. His countenance was radiant. I thought I perceived that the men regarded him with looks of envy, and that several women pointed me out with contempt.

The disclosures of M. de Rochegune then occurred to me, and my blood ran cold as I thought of the disgraceful reports, of which Gontran and myself were at that very moment probably the object; the appearances against us were so overwhelming. I was ready to faint with emotion; and I said to Monsieur Lugarto, in a tone ot entreaty,

"Our fate is in your hands, sir! Have pity on us! Let us leave this garden."

"Here comes the Duchess de Berry. Gontran cannot do otherwise than go and pay his respects—nor you," said M. Lugarto.

It was true!—the princess royal attended that ball. She was at that moment entering the ball in which the dancing was going on. I felt a little encouraged. When I was presented to the Duchess de Berry, after my marriage, she had deigned to receive me with that touching grace and cordiality so peculiar to her——

"Mademoiselle is a prize; indeed, you are fortunate, beyond your deserts;" said she to Gontran, with an expression, partly smiling and partly serious.

I imagined that her highness, by receiving me in her usual manner, would put down the malicious reports in circulation, and that, from the mere effect of habit on courtiers, everybody present would model their behaviour toward us after that of her highness. I took the arm of Gontran, and we approached her royal highness. My heart beat as if it would break. Seeing us approach, the persons who surrounded *Madame* withdrew, enough to make quite a large and empty place between us and the princess. I was appalled when I observed the expression of *Madame*, ordinarily so benevolent, suddenly darken, and become haughty and severe. In spite of his assurance, Monsieur de Lancry trembled slightly. Hardly had he made his bow to *Madame*, when her royal highness, looking at my husband with a mixture of cold contempt and offended pride, as if she was indignant at our having dared to appear in her presence, turned her back upon us, without uttering a word.

M. de Lancry turned pale with mortification, and with rage. He excited my pity to such a degree, that it gave me strength to support my own sensations. I said to him, in a tone of firmness—

"You must excuse *Madame*, my friend. She is always so kind, so generous, that she must have been misled by the calumnies of the world. Come, come—say nothing of this to Monsieur Lugarto. Let us not afford this new triumph to his malice."

I almost dragged M. de Lancry along. A crowd of persons, curious to see *Madame*, had followed her; this enabled us to conceal our confusion in the crowd, and to rejoin M. Lugarto and the Princess de Ksernika.

"Madame seemed to receive you very well," said M. Lugarto, ironically to M. de Lancry.

"Yes! yes! perfectly well!" said Gontran, with a forced smile.

I took the arm of Gontran. His heart was beating so quick and so violently, that I could feel its pulsations. I saw that it was with difficulty he restrained himself.

"Do not let me keep you any longer, my dear fellow, from Madame de Ksernika," said M. Lugarto.

I pressed close to the side of Gontran. He said to me, in a low tone, "One moment longer—take his arm—I beseech you."

The accent of his voice struck me as very peculiar; he added, aloud, "And I, my dear Lugarto, should be sorry to detain you any longer, from Madame de Lancry. We understand each other perfectly. But were we not to go to Tortoni's, this evening, and get some ice?"

"Certainly!" replied M. Lugarto. "I was just thinking of it, my dear fellow; and I should not, on any account, have excluded you from that part of our evening's performance," added he, with a sardonic smile.

"Nor I," said Gontran.

I was in despair. I thought this unhappy evening was ended. All Paris was at Tortoni's. Our presence would furnish a new opportunity for calumny.

On our way to our carriage, M. Lugarto said to me, in an under tone, "I have not been duped by De Lancry. The Duchess de Berry received him in the most mortifying manner. I discovered this by the beaming countenances of those who accompanied her highness; for Gontran is as much detested by the men, as you are by the women—thanks to the natural advantages you both possess over them. You see the *town and the court* and all the old people suppose that we are on the best possible terms. You have nothing farther to fear, therefore, from your reputation . . . . Allow yourself, then, to be beloved; you will find that I can render myself very supportable. Already, this evening, you have been much more gracious to me than usual. Come! I love you to such excess, that, if you pleased you might deprive me of all the power I possess over your husband."

I made no reply. We got into the carriage and drove to Tortoni's. Much to my annoyance, Gontran led us to one of the saloons on the first floor. I there recognized several persons who had been witnesses of the contemptuous reception of my husband by *Madame*. My confusion was at its height when I observed that several persons smiled maliciously as they looked at us.

"At last," said Gontran, "the moment has come."

Not understanding his meaning, I looked at him. The expression of his face frightened me. I recollect that horrible scene as distinctly as if I was still present at it. Gontran was sitting at my side. Opposite him were M. Lugarto and Madame de Ksernika.

Suddenly M. de Lancry stood up, and, with a voice loud and trembling with rage he said to M. Lugarto—

"M. Lugarto, you are a scoundrel!"

The latter, stupefied in spite of his audacity, did not know what reply to make. Several gentlemen rose hastily. A perfect silence reigned in the saloon. I was incapable of moving. It seemed to me that I was in a dream.

Gontran resumed: "M. Lugarto, you have dared to attack publicly the reputation of Madame de Lancry, and to give out that I have played the part of the complacent husband, because I am under certain obligations to you. I tell you now, in the most public manner, that you are an infamous impostor. Madame de Lancry has always treated you with the contempt you deserved, and you have basely used the intimacy which has existed between us, to give an authority to your cowardly calumnies."

The first, the only idea which occurred to me was that this man would ruin Gontran by revealing the fatal secret which he possessed.

"My God! my God!" cried I, bursting into tears.

Two or three ladies, whom I knew by having met them in society, came around me, and supported me with touching kindness; while several men interposed between Gontran and M. Lugarto.

The latter, as soon as his first consternation was over, seemed to redouble his impudence. I heard him reply to M. de Lancry, with an air of constrained and offended dignity—

"I am at a loss to understand, sir, the motive of these reproaches. I declare here, in the most public manner, that no one entertains a higher respect for Madame de Lancry than I do: I am totally ignorant of the calumnies you allude to. As to the obligations you may be under to me I am not conscious of having disclosed them to any one. Your attack is so violent—the accusation you make so grave, and, above all so unexpected—for we have just been passing the evening together—that I can only attribute it to a passing fancy, which I lament, without being able to account for it."

"Miserable scoundrel!" cried Gontran, transported beyond all bounds by the affected moderation and the infernal perfidy of M. Lugarto's reply.

"All the company present," replied the latter, "will understand, I hope, the position in which this gentleman and myself stand in relation to each other, and that there are insults which one must know how to bear."

"And that—will you bear that?" exclaimed Gontran.

And I heard the noise of a box on the ear.

There was a moment of tumult, over which predominated the voice of M. Lugarto, who was dragged away, and who exclaimed, with an accent of rage which I shall never forget—

"Insult for insult, sir; we are even. To-morrow all Paris shall know how I revenge myself."

CHAPTER XV.

A VISIT.

I PASSED a dreadful night.

M. de Lancry had hardly got me home when I had a violent nervous attack, which deprived me of all consciousness. I do not remember anything that passed during the time it lasted. I recovered from it about four o'clock in the afternoon.

My poor Blondeau was sitting by me, weeping silently. I raised my hands to my forehead as if to collect my thoughts. On calling to mind the scene of the previous evening, I had no doubt that a duel had been the consequence. Alas! this was the slightest of my terrors. M. Lugarto had it in his power to ruin Gontran. This man might perhaps have spoken.

"Where is M. de Lancry?" said I.

Blondeau looked at me with compassionate tenderness, and replied: "The Viscount went out this morning, madam; he afterward returned and is gone out again."

"And without being wounded?" I exclaimed.

Blondeau appeared astonished. "Without being wounded, madam! not the least in the world—if he had been so, he would not have set out on a journey!"

"On a journey! what is that you say?"

"The Viscount, when he came in this morning, gave orders to prepare his travelling dressing case, one or two trunks, and he set out, taking his new valet with him, and left this letter for you, madam."

"Gone! gone! without me! and the warnings I received from M. de Mortagne!" exclaimed I; "there is something fatal in this."

I hastily opened Gontran's letter. In a few words he informed me, that in consequence of what had happened the night before, a meeting had taken place between him and M. Lugarto, and that the latter had been slightly wounded. My husband was obliged, as he told me, to absent himself for a few days only, to conclude *the important affair which I knew;* he much regretted being obliged to leave me alone. but that I could fully comprehend how serious and important were the measures he was then undertaking.

"By which of the *Barrieres* did M. de Lancry leave Paris—what road did he take?" enquired I of Blondeau: for desirous to conform to the express recommendations of M. de Mortagne never to be separated from Gontran, I wished immediately to rejoin him.

"I do not know, madam."

"We must send immediately to the Poste aux Chevaux, to know which road M. de Lancry has taken; with this information, and by inquiring at the post-houses he has passed, I may be able to overtake him; we will set off instantly, you shall accompany me."

"Commence a journey in your present state! that is downright impossible."

"I tell you it must be so—you do not know how exceedingly important it is."

"How are we to know whither M. de Lancry has gone; for he did not go either in his own carriage, or with post-horses. He sent for a hackney-coach, and got into it with his valet."

"Good Heaven!" exclaimed I in despair. I could not at all comprehend this abrupt daparture of my husband, but I feared it had been occasioned by some perfidious plot of Lugarto's. I sent Blondeau to enquire if the latter was still at Paris: she was told that he was at his house, that his wound was rather serious, and that he would not be able to get out for some days."

I was a prey to the most dreadful anxiety. I trembled when I reflected that M. de Mortagne appeared to have forseen the absence of Gontran, as he had so expressly recommended me not to leave Gontran.

It was in vain that Blondeau interrogated the servants who were present at my husband's departure. I could not gather the slightest information from them.

I passed the remainder of the day and the following night in the most indescribable agony. I could not understand why M. Lugarto had not carried into effect, his threat of ruining de Lancry; he might, perhaps, have done so. Perhaps, my husband, being compelled precipitately to leave Paris, to escape the consequences of that exposure, had not wished to alarm me.

I did not know to whom I could address myself, to obtain information on this subject. I determined, whatever it might cost my feelings, to go to Mademoiselle de Maran. She, better than any one, could give me the intelligence I required, for she collected, with eagerness, the calumnies that were circulated concerning us.

I was about to set out for my aunt's house, when she was announced. Under any other circumstances, this visit would have been hateful to me, but then I almost thanked Heaven for sending Mademoiselle de Maran to me. However when I observed the sneering and satisfied air with which she entered, I repented of my desire to see her.

"Well, well! what is the matter then," said my aunt; "family troubles already, my little dear? and in your pattern of a family too, so free and easy? Out of doors they talk of tragedies—which, I am sure, is but farces after all!"

"I know not what you mean, madam: I am at this moment dreadfully anxious about Gontran. I have not seen him since that cruel scene, which will, at least, have silenced the calumnies of which Gontran and myself were the subject."

"What are you saying there, my little dear; you think it produced a good effect, that scene at Tortoni's; tell me, are you crazy."

"I believe, madam, that any worthy people, who may have heard Gontran prove so clearly the infamy of Lugarto, will no longer allow themselves to echo those reports, still more ridiculous than they were loathsome. In future, although no one may defend our cause, yet no one will dare to attack us."

"Do not talk to me of proofs; your husband did not prove anything; do you really think any person was the dupe of that farce, then?"

"Farce, madam, farce!"

"Most certainly: could M. Lugarto have replied otherwise to the uncouth attack made on him by Gontran? Could he, before all the world, have acknowledged that you had felt a preference for him? So, my little dear, you have had the simplicity to think yourself white as a swan, and your good husband too, because M. Lugarto has admitted your innocence before the lustres at Tortoni's. Why, mere good manners would have obliged him to act thus. He must have been a peasant, a mere country clown to have done otherwise. He is no favorite of mine, for I think this Lugarto as silly as a goose, in all that touches his assumed title, and his *stars, or upon a field argent;* but I must, with all the world, acknowledge that on this occasion he behaved with great reserve, much moderation and unparalleled dignity. Was it not for your bright eyes, that he allowed himself to be threatened, abused, and almost knocked down by your husband, without even uttering a complaint; but on the contrary, defending your reputation? do n't tell me! why Galaor and Oorandates were monsters of debauchery and puppyism, in comparison with this poor Lugarto."

I could not find a word, with which to answer Mademoiselle de Maran. I had already too sad an experience of the ill nature of the world, to doubt that the conduct of Gontran and M. de Lugarto, might be interpreted as my aunt had said; oppressed with vexation, my head drooped upon my chest.

Proud of her triumph over me, my aunt rejoined, with cruel exultation in her manner:

"What is still worse for Gontran is, that Lugarto conducted himself bravely in the duel; he was wounded; honor is satisfied, according to the common phrase, and without considering that this handsome and super-eminently rich man might in sweetness, had it so pleased him, have refused to fight with Gontran, seeing that your husband is in the awkward plight of owing to Lugarto an enormous sum—now, between ourselves, it is a singular way of paying debts, to make one pocket a good thrust with a sword, but as Lugarto is satisfied with that kind of payment, no one has anything to say. It only proves the more, that he loves you furiously; and even since his wound, I am told, that when he speaks of you, he keeps on cooing like a faithful shepherd, in the most touching and affecting manner in the world."

"Then it appears, madam, that since that scene Gontran and myself, have fallen still lower in the estimation of the world;" observed I, with so much calmness that it astonished Mademoiselle de Maran; "and on the contrary, Lugarto inspires the most touching interest?"

"You have guessed rightly, my dear; it is just so, neither more nor less; therefore, you see me so much moved, so dreadfully unhinged. I came to warn you of it, and to tell you, rather too late, perhaps—but it is better to repent late than never, that I am much affected at having consented to your marriage with Gontran. Who could ever have suspected this of him? Do you know that your de Mortagne, with his crack-brained violence, did not lack a certain sort of judgment? But all that we could say or do, was of no use; it was impossible to drive this fine husband out of your little head, my dear; and then to think that after being married scarcely six months, here you are, with a husband who is despised, ruined, and unfaithful! Really, it is enough to break one's heart. I know you will say, the conduct of your unfaitful spouse gives you the right of retaliating your injuries upon him; and that this Lugarto, in spite of his yellow waxen face, his fits of epilepsy, and his mania for titles, has some agreeable qualities; it's no matter; when I am told of your liking for him, am disgusted—I am indignant."

"Truly, madam!"

"Truly! but how well you take all I have said to you. It does not affect you in the least."

"No, madam; as you see: I am calm, quite calm; and above all much flattered by the feelings which dictates the consolations you have offered to me."

"And you have good reason to be flattered by it: but I told you when they talked of your liking for Lugarto, I was disgusted; I said to these slanderous people, you would be most amazed were you to be informed the how and wherefore, of the liking of that dear countess de Lancry for M. Lugarto; there is in that young person, a species of courageous abnegation similar to that of the heroic women of antiquity; a sort of mixture of the virtues of Portia, and the mother of the Gracchi: what I said there is perfectly true. Seeing you there so calm, so tranquil, would it be possible to imagine that your husband renders you the most unhappy of women? and that, whether right or wrong, your reputation and his are lost for ever. But, tell me, now that I think of it do they accuse you unjustly? how dreadful it must be to you!"

"Hear me, madam," said I to Mademoiselle de Maran, with a calmness that perfectly confounded her, "you have come either to enjoy a triumph; to ascertain whether your prophesies are fulfilled—whether the young wife is an unhappy as the young girl, the child was. Is it not so, madam?"

"Go on. I will answer you presently; it is amazing, how clear-sighted you are!"

"Well, madam, I am about to wound you most severely; with one blow, I will avenge myself, of all the harm that you have done, of all the injury you wish to do me."

"This is astonishing; you do not alarm me in the least, my little dear."

"Pray look me stedfastly in the face, madam; remark my tone of voice, observe particularly the expression of my features; you, who are so penetrating, will discover whether I speak the truth or not."

"To the facts—to the facts," said Mademoiselle de Maran, sharply.

"Well, madam, I love Gontran now, as dearly as I ever loved him—do you hear me—I love him passionately—I love him more than ever, for he is unhappy. This love is my strength, it is my courage, it is my consolation. Thanks to this love, I have overcome—wounded, perhaps, but smiling—the most cruel trials; and further thanks to this love, I defy the future, with a calm and serene brow."

There was such an expression of truth in my words—my countenance, reanimated by the force of my convictions, was so radiant, that Mademoiselle de Maran, not being able to conceal her rage, exclaimed:

"'Tis possible, that which she has said is true! there are women imbecile enough to be thus fascinated by a man! the stupid fools! If they were even knocked down with a club, they would still exclaim, with all the languishing voluptuousness of religious votaries, in ecstacies—oh! heavenly sweetness—oh! ineffable transport!"

But returning involuntarily to her former habits, Mademoiselle de Maran grasped my arm violently, crying, "You must be either blind, stupid, or mad."

The anger of my aunt produced a good effect upon me. My love for Gontran was clearly understood: it could, it ought to console me under every suffering, since Mademoiselle de Maran was so enraged at seeing that I still felt its influence.

"You ought to be sent to a madhouse," rejoined my aunt.

"I love him, madam; I cannot say more."

"She will drive me mad!" ejaculated my aunt, "with her chorus to suit all tunes—I love him!!! I love him!!! I love him!!! What a beautiful answer! You love him; but he has deceived you—he owes enormous sums to M. de Lugarto—the very moment he insists on being repaid, you will be reduced to beggary."

"I will partake that poverty with Gontran, and am—"

"But he is dishonored in the eyes of all the world."

"He is not so in mine."

"But he despises you; he has allowed your reputation to be compromised by this Lugarto."

"Gontran is certain of my love."

"He is so certain, that he does not love you."

"But I love him, madam."

I do not know with what peculiar accent I pronounced these words, but Mademoiselle de Maran stamped her feet, and shrieked out with rage, "The devil himself must have inspired her! This love has turned to madness. She is now incurable."

"Yes! oh, yes! you have said it, madam. It is a madness, but, at all events, a holy and noble madness! it concentrates all my powers of mind, all the devotion of my soul, on Gontran. Except in him, nothing exists for me. Whatever his life may be—however bitter, painful or humiliating—to share it with him, is my only wish. You are right, I am mad. What is madness, but exaggeration of one sentiment beyond all others. Well, I admit that I am mad! And like the mad, I have those cherished, odored, infatuating recollections, which momentarily return to shine upon the spirit, and transport it to an ideal world. These recollections are of those days of ineffable happiness, which I passed with him, when I was so proud of being young and beautiful, because he loved my youthfulness and beauty.

"But now he is tired and satiated with your beauty. As to your youth,—a fine advantage that is! you only have a longer time to suffer."

"You cannot understand these questions of youth and beauty, madam; or rather you understand them but too well. It is this that so enrages you. But Heaven is just; it has willed that you should know the bitter pangs of envy; it has reserved for you a dreadful torment, that of seeing me, in spite of all, and always, made happy by the man, who, as you thought, would cause my greatest sufferings. Look madam: were he now to say, 'begone!. I hate you!' he could not tear from out my heart, that treasure of adored remembrances on which I could exist an age. However pitiless, however contemptuous Gontran might become, he could not now obliterate the past—that past, brilliant and dazzling as a fairy dream—that past, in which I could take refuge, were the present to become gloomy and obscure!"

"Oh, dear! oh, dear! is she not astonishing and triumphant with her dear little past? Don't tell me! Was it not for your money that he married you? Had you been as ugly and as wicked as the seven deadly sins, he would have married you all the same."

"And therefore, madam, think how happy I must have been—being at once rich, handsome, and devotedly attached."

"But this is really intolerable. Such a passion is the very obstinacy of frenzy!" cried Mademoiselle de Maran, quite beside herself; "but at last he will die some day; he cannot avoid dying, this dear and beautiful adored. How will you then console yourself? ha! ha! I have you there. Answer me that."

"In this world I will pray for him, in the other I will join him. My life will therefore be spent in prayer and hope."

Mademoiselle de Maran rose abruptly and said, "Well! this must be a wager, a settled matter, a defiance by which I am not duped. You bear up against bad fortune—you are so proud. You would burst with despair and rage, sooner than shed a tear before me. It is very well, my dear; as you please. You are happy—very happy—superlatively happy, are you not?

Much good may it do you. I feel disposed to be compassionate, to your sorrows; but I find you of so robust a temperament, in all that concerns the affections of the heart, that I will not trouble myself farther. It was my duty charitably to inform you of all that was said regarding you, and your most beauteous Alcander. You find all that simple and natural; nothing could be better. But now, at all events, you must not expect that I shall take up your defence, or pity you in any way. We shall see to what this grand obstinacy will lead."

Mademoiselle de Maran left me, boiling with rage. I was delighted with my own firmness, and the sort of revelation of her plans which I owed to this visit. Perhaps, but for the violence of her attack I should not have my own heart so clearly. I should never have dared to ask myself the questions which I did.

There are suppositions so painful and so horrible in themselves, that the mind, as it were by instinct, avoids all question of them; but when once admitted, once resolved, it feels happy they were entertained.

The visit of Mademoiselle de Maran had an effect quite contrary to that she had intended. This discussion conveyed to me still more of the profoundness of my devotion for Gontran. Previously to this, I might have doubted myself: I doubted now no longer. I had, without blenching, considered the most dreadful chances which affection might have to encounter.

Alas! this powerful conviction was but too much needed, to resist the fresh attacks with which I was menaced.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE JOURNEY.

A NEW grief now afflicted me,

My poor Blondeau fell ill. My physician appeared surprised at this sudden indisposition. Without being serious, it kept the excellent woman in a state of unaccountable torpor and somnolency,

My uneasiness, as to Gontran, increased more and more. I did not know in whom I could confide. I sent to Madame de Richeville: she was still in Anjou; her servants did not know when she would return.

M. de Mortagne had not been seen in Paris, since the day on which he addressed to M. de Rochegune at my house.

With what bitterness did I regret Ursula, my only friend! If I did not apply to her for advice, I could at least have told her all the sorrows that were agitating me.

She often wrote to me letters full of melancholy and sorrow. She was not happy; not that her husband was wanting in attention, in kindness, to her, but *he could not understand her*, She complained of the monotonous life she led, and looked back with regret to our childhood.

Since my entrance into the world, I had not formed a friendship with a woman; for while I acknowledged the generous qualities of Madam de Richville, in spite of myself I could not help experiencing a vague feeling of jealousy—she also had loved Gontran!

I thus found myself completely isolated. I was surrounded by people who had recently entered my service; nearly all my household had been changed; the woman who had been longest with me, had come only six weeks before. The illness of Blondeau, deprived me of the only trusty person I had about me.

I had been three days ignorant of the fate of Gontran. About five o'clock Fritz, the valet he had taken with him, arrived in one of those cabriolets kept at the post-houses, and brought me a letter from my husband. I was astounded by the information which it gave me. Gontran was ill; he was expecting me in a house close to Chantilly, where the bearer of the letter would conduct me,

M. de Lancry desired, that on my receiving the letter, I should set off, post, with Blondeau and Fritz.

"It is very important to me," added M. de Lancry, "that it should not be known in Paris, that you have come to rejoin me. You will, therefore, desire the servants to tell everybody who may call, that you are gone to spend a few days with Madame Secherin. You will please write to this effect, to Mademoiselle de Maran, to my uncle de Versac, and also to the Princess de Ksernika. *I entreat you*, Matilda, whatever repugnance you may feel in writing to this last named person, do not fail to do so, for it is important the world should be convinced that you are gone to visit Ursula, and not to be near me. I will explain the whole of this mystery to you, which, happily will not last long. You may place entire confidence in Fritz, whom I send to you; he will conduct you to me near Chantilly; there I expect you, my dear, and good Matilda, Do not fear! I trust that happy days are still in store for us."

I acknowledge to you, my happiness at the thought of again seeing Gontran, overbalanced the uneasiness I had felt, with regard to my own health. I gave the necessary orders for setting out immediately. Although I felt a repugnance to questioning servants, I could not help asking Fritz, whether M. de Lancry had fallen ill during his journey, or after his return.

"I cannot reply to the viscountess's question on this subject," replied Fritz. "In going from Paris, the viscount left me near Chantilly, in the house where he is waiting for madam; he left it above three days ago, and returned to it this morning. The viscount appeared fatigued, and ill; he ordered me to take a post-chaise, and come to fetch madam."

A mad hope entered my heart. I thought, for a moment, Gontran had deceived me, in stating that our cottage was destroyed—that he was preparing a surprise for me, and that in this retreat, we were to take refuge from the evil slanders of the world I refrained, as I may say, from marring my hopes and cherished recollections, by asking one single question on the subject.

As Gontran had recommended to me, I wrote to Mademoiselle de Maran, to M. de Versac, and to Madame de Ksernika, telling them I was going to spend a few days in the country with Ursula; I gave orders, at home, that the same answer should be given to all persons calling to see me.

I was vexed that I could not take Blondeau with me; but I would not say a word to her as to my intention; notwithstanding her indisposition, she would have insisted on accompanying me. I went to her room to see her; she scarcely recognized me; her features seemed much altered. She did not appear to suffer pain; she was merely overcome by a benumbing torpor.

I left Paris about six o'clock. The waiting-maid who attended me, with the valet of M. de Lancry, was a morose-tempered girl, whose countenance displeased me, without my knowing wherefore.

It was the end of June; the sky was gloomy, the air heavy, the heat almost suffocating, and we were theatened with a storm. Notwithstanding the length of the days at this season, at half-past seven o'clock, when we changed horses at Ecouen, it was almost dark. The thunder began to rumble at a distance—the lightning flashed on the horizon. The atmosphere became still more heavy.

At this relay, a slight dispute took place between my servant and the postillion, who had driven me to Ecouen. I mention this fact, so unimportant in appearance, merely because it led to matters of more serious consequence.

The postillions had, until then, been paid four francs per post, I believe, for I requested them to make great speed; I don't know why, but at this post, Fritz would not pay more than three. The postillion came to the carriage-door, to complain of it. I ordered him to be paid what he asked; adding, that above all, I wished to be driven fast, being in great haste to arrive at my journey's end.

The postmaster, who was present, during the discussion, recommended the postillions to be very careful when they should get to the brow of the hill near Luzarches, as the descent was dangerous; the pavement of the road, being almost entirely taken up, as it was about to be renewed. Moreover, he said, lanterns were placed about it, to point one the danger.

We set off from Ecouen. The darkness had increased; large drops of rain began to fall. I was apprehensive that the loudness of the thunder might frighten the horses, and that some accident might prevent my reaching Gontran. Otherwise, I contemplated, with a melancholy calmness, these precursors of the storm.

Alas! these grand phenomena of nature, awful and terrible as they may be, are much less alarming than those whispered and cowardly malignities which buz around as. There is so much of majesty in this commotion of the elements, that the soul rises above all fear, and contemplates with religious admiration, the magnificence of the spectacle.

These thoughts gave me fresh strength. Moreover, was I not going to meet de Lancry? He was merely indisposed, he told me. I hoped that, by my tender care and a little rest, he would soon be cured.

I had almost persuaded myself that Gontran was waiting for me, either in our former dwelling, or in some house he had since taken, where we should remain retired for some length of time.

I considered this, so much desired event, as the recompense of my devotion to Gontran. I thanked heaven for it. I had so much confidence in the strength of my attachment, that I no longer doubted Gontran would be happy, when left under the sole influence of my love.

A short time before arriving at the descent near Luzarches, which had been pointed out as dangerous, my carriage stopped on the summit of a hill, which we had just ascended. It was necessary to lock the wheel. I heard, first at some distance, the galloping of a horse, which soon came up with us. I mechanically looked out of the window. A horseman, coming at full speed, called out, in a panting voice, to Fritz, "You are pursued; they are in such haste, that they pushed through Ecouen without changing horses. I am not more than a quarter of an hour in advance of them; they are coming up the hill. I shall go yonder, and give notice that——"

I could not catch the remainder of this sentence; he then left us, at full speed. Half dead with terror, my first idea was, that it must be M. Lugarto. "Who is pursuing us? who was that man?" cried I. Fritz hesitated a moment, and replied: "He is a man to whom M. de Lancry sent me with a letter, at the same time I went to fetch madame. He has doubtless followed the orders he received from the viscount, in hastening to apprise madam that we are pursued.

"But who can be pusuing us? Good Heavens!"

"I cannot imagine," replied Fritz, stooping down on the ground to listen.

In fact, during one of those moments of profound silence which often occur during a violent storm, we heard the noise of a carriage, still distant, which, notwithstanding the steepness of the ascent, was approaching rapidly.

"There they are! there they are!" cried Fritz in seeming alarm.

All was explained to me. Doubtless Gontran, fearing M. Lugarto might discover his retreat, or be informed of my departure, had given orders to some trusty person to watch his movements. This man had seen M. Lugarto, (who had watched him on the road,) and was going forward to inform de Lancry that his retreat was discovered, and had informed us as he passed.

"Heavens! what shall I do? what shall I do?"

The noise of the carriage approached nearer and nearer, almost to the top of the hill, and had only to descend it to come up with us."

"Be not alarmed, madame," suddenly said Fritz; "I have thought of a plan. Postillions, mind your horses, and go full speed, without locking the wheels. You must stop immediately after you have passed the precise spot, where they have put the lanterns which you see down yonder."

The words were scarcely uttered, when the carriage again moved on, with frightful rapidity. It did not merely run, but bounded down this rapid descent. It required great dexterity in the postillion to pass over even the sound part of the road—a kind of passage cleared between great masses of paving stones, which were only visible from three lanterns fixed on some posts.

This danger past, we stopped. I looked though the glass at the back of the carriage. Fritz jumped from from his seat, ran to the lanterns, and extinguished them. The postillions, having their backs turned to that part of the road which they had passed, and which was hidden from them by the carriage, could not see what Fritz had done. I understood his intentions.

The night was so dark, that the persons who pursued us, ignorant of the danger that awaited them, as they had not changed horses at Ecouen, would run blindly upon these heaps of stones, and perhaps, dash their carriage in pieces. We had descended the hill with such rapidity, that the other carriage hardly appeared at the top, when Fritz called out, "Push on postillions! ten francs for each of you, if you gallop up the hill! Notwithstanding this great temptation, the horses being blown by the violent speed they had already been put to, slowly clambered up the rough acclivity which succeeded the descent.

With inexpressible anxiety I continued to look through the back window of the carriage. Fritz remained standing on the steps of the rumble to ascertain the result of his stratagem. The night was still so dark that we could not distingnish the carriage that was pursuing us; all we could see were two luminous points, its lamps, which came nearer and nearer, and with frightful rapidity was now descending the almost precipitous hill.

A flash of lightning momentarily but clearly showed to me, a carriage drawn by two white horses, bounding impetuously along, and then all was dark again. A horrible idea suddenly crossed my mind. Should the unfortunate beings who were now approaching almost certain destruction, not be in pursuit of us! Horrified by this idea, I almost involuntarily held out my arms toward them, and cried "Stop!"

Another flash of lightning showed me the carriage, dragged on with irresistible velocity. It was hardly twenty paces from the heap of stones upon which it must inevitably be dashed. What were my feelings when I thought that I recognized the peculiar shape of a sort of *Britzschka*, belonging to M. de Mortagne; in which he arrived from Italy, at my aunt's house, the day my marriage contract was signed. Gontran had often spoken to me of the singular, but convenient construction of this carriage.

Seeing the two luminous points, which indicated its position, suddenly disappear, I uttered a piercing shriek. I covered my eyes with my hand as if I had occasioned the fatal catastrophe which I dreaded. At this moment our horses, having reached the top of the hill, we had been ascending, and finding themselves on a level road, set off again with renewed impetuosity.

It was in vain I called to the postillions; the deafening rattle of the wheels drowned my voice; they did not hear me: I threw myself back in the carriage in despair.

Little by little, fearing to admit the possibility of M. de Mortagne being the victim of such a dreadful accident, I tried to persuade myself that I had been mistaken. Moreover, perhaps that was not the only carriage of this peculiar form. M. de Mortagne might have sold it, and M. de Lugarto might, perhaps, have purchased it. I thus calmed, or rather assuaged my feelings of alarm.

I endeavoured to persuade myself that it was the latter who was pursuing me, and that a providential punishment had attained the man who had done us so much harm; and, besides, I was going to meet Gontran. This hope alone sufficed to reassure me. M. de Lancry, forewarned by the messenger who had passed us, would clear up all my doubts upon this subject.

After having continued our route on the high road for about half an hour. I perceived that we had left the pavement, and had taken a cross road The night was so dark that I could not discover whether we had entered the forest. We went on for some distance, and then the carriage suddenly stopped. The storm still continued.

I saw a gloomy house, all the shutters of which were closed. Fritz got down from his seat, knocked, and the door was opened.

My heart beat almost to breaking on thinking I was about to see Gontran. I quickly entered the house, while the servants were unpacking the carriage.

An elderly woman, whom I had never seen before, begged me to walk into a small parlor on the ground floor.

"Where is M. de Lancry?" cried I.

"The viscount left this letter for madam."

"Good heaven! is not M. de Lancry here?"

"The viscount will not return till to morrow evening, which he has no doubt explained to madam in this letter."

Being much agitated by the absence of Gontran, I took the letter which the woman offerred me, and read these words:

"Do not make yourself uneasy, my dear Matilda; I am obliged to leave this on the moment to take advantage of a fortunate circumstance which enables me to *settle everything*, and for the future to think of nothing but your happiness. Courage! my beloved and generous wife; our misfortunes are now terminated. Wait for me here. To-morrow evening, at the latest, I shall return. Should the house please you we will remain here, till we can establish ourselves at your chateau at Maran. Adieu! consolation and hope of my life. Pardon the sorrows I have caused you, and still love me a little."

Although this prolonged absence much annoyed me, I felt reconciled to it, when I reflected that I should see Gontran the following day; and then what happiness to find that he was realising my fervent wishes. He promised to live with me, alone, in this retreat.

I had, for some time past, been so accustomed to mysterious occurrences that I could not be astonished at this new and sudden absence.

"Did not a man arrive this evening, on horseback, who brought to M. de Lancry some very urgent news?" said I, addressing myself to the woman who gave me the note.

"Call Fritz, instantly," cried I, in utter astonishment.

"M. de Lancry ordered Fritz to return to Chantilly with the carriage; for there is no coach-house here. He is already gone; he did not even come into the house."

"How! Did not a man, on horseback, arrive to-night from Paris?"

"No, madam."

What had become of this messenger? What had he to communicate to M. de Lancry? I began to feel uneasy at being in a lonely house, with people whom I did not know about me. I, above all, regretted that Blondeau was not with me. Could it be M. Lugarto who was pursuing me? Admitting this hypothesis, it somewhat calmed me. His carriage must have been so much damaged, that he could not proceed on his journey. But if I were mistaken—if, instead of him, it was M. de Mortagne—this thought was frightful; I would not dwell upon it.

The woman who received me, asked whether she should not bring me in some supper. I had left Paris without dining; fatigue had overcome me. I determined upon eating something to keep up my strength. The woman left me.

The room in which I sat, was elegantly furnished; hung with red drapery, and lit up with numerous wax candles, standing in gilt candelabras. I did not dare to hope, that, for a long time to come, I should live there in retirement, with M. de Lancry.

A short time afterward, the woman brought in a small table, laid out with much taste, telling me that M. de Lancry himself had ordered the supper for me. I felt gratified by this attention of Gontran, and sent away the woman, that I might be alone, and freely meditate on the occurences of the day.

After having a few spoonfuls of soup, eaten the breast of a fowl, and drank two or three glasses of water, with a little Bordeaux wine in it, for I was very thirsty—you will see, presently, why I enter into these puerile details—I pushed back the table, and drew my arm-chair toward the chimney, although there was no fire on the hearth.

The storm still howled on sullenly. A violent storm had arisen; its long and melancholy moanings were distinctly heard. After some time I yielded to the moral and physical fatigues I had endured; My eyes became heavy in spite of myself. Not wishing yet to yield to the influence of sleep, I rose abruptly, made several turns around the room; and, by accident, at last approached a door, apparently leading to an adjacent room. Was it the wind, or the effect of my imagination? I thought I heard a profound and fearful sigh behind this door. I felt alarmed.

A vague presentiment of some misfortune stole over me. I saw a bell on one side of the chimney; I ran to it, and pulled it violently—no one answered; I rang again, and more violently than before—no one came; a third attempt proved, unsuccessful.

Terrified at the death like silence which reigned throughont the house, I threw myself into a chair, covering my face with both hands. It then appeared to me, that an insurmountable heaviness nailed me to my seat. I felt my legs become more feeble; an irresistible drowsiness came over me. Fearing that I should fall asleep, and wishing to find a chambermaid, or the person who had brought my supper, I conquered my terrors, took a candle from the table, and advanced resolutely toward the door that opened into the ante-room.

I took hold of the handle of the door, and felt it move beneath my touch I heard a harsh and grating sound; some one double-locked the door on the outside. In my sudden alarm, I shook the door, but I could not open it.

Almost stupefied by terror, and beginning, then to form vague ideas of the most dreadful machinations, I rushed to the window and opened it; the shutters were also barred on the outside.

Bewildered, I then darted to the door, behind which I thought I heard a sigh. At that door appeared the Count Lugarto.

CHAPTER XVII.

REVELATIONS.

M. Lugarto was very pale—there was an expression of demonical malignity in his countenance, such as I had never before observed.

"All who inhabit this house are devoted to my service. Every outlet is closed — no power on earth can remove you from this place before to-morrow!" such were the first words addressed to me by this man.

Seized with a sudden horror I looked wildly at him, without uttering a word. Suddenly rushing to one of the windows, I exclaimed, "Do not come near me!"

He shrugged his shoulders, seated himself in an arm-chair, and said, "Let us converse quietly. I have many things to communicate." He took out a pocket-book, which he laid upon the table. "Sit down," said he to me, "for it will occupy some time, and you must be fatigued.'

"May heaven have mercy on me!" cried I, kneeling upon a chair, and I addressed a fervent prayer for its protection.

M. Lugarto turned over the papers in his pocket-book, took out some of them, and said, showing them to me, "These will much astonish you—but let us proceed in due order."

Strengthened by the pious invocation I had just addressed to Heaven, I rose up and remained standing. I looked with firmness at M. Lugarto, and replied, "There is a god in Heaven, and I have several friends upon this earth."

"Doubtless you have, and first of all myself; but, if you reckon also on M. de Mortagne, you will be deceived; his carriage was dashed to pieces near Luzarches. He himself remained upon the spot, half-dead.

"It was true, then! the carriage that pursued us——"

"Was his! Fritz is an admirable fellow. I knew well what I was about when I ordered your husband to take him in his service.

Overwhelmed by this intelligence, I remained speechless for a moment; but I soon took courage, for I reflected that M. Lugarto could not be informed of the fate of M. de Mortagne.

"You speak falsely, sir!" cried I, "for, admitting that this fatal event has occurred, you could not have had any details of the state in which M. de Mortagne remained. Fritz never left me——"

"Nor was it Fritz who told me. One of the two men whom I had ordered to follow your carriage, at some distance, after your leaving Paris, brought this good news to me. Without being a soldier, like our dear de Lancry, I know the value of a rear-guard. See how well it has served me! Perceiving that M. de Mortagne was endeavoring to overtake you, one of these men rode forward with great speed, to warn Fritz of it, and then came on to me; the other follower remained at some little distance from M. de Mortagne's carriage, to observe it. After witnessing the upset of your would-be-deliverer, he saw him dragged half-dead, out of his britzschka, and my faithful servant arrived here about a quarter of an hour after you, leaving his horse at a little distance, that your suspicions might not be awakened. In a word, a certain proof of your having no more reason to hope for the presence of M. de Mortagne, than I have to dread it, is that you see me here quite tranquil, and as they all say, with perfect elbow-room."

All that M. Lugarto had said was so probable, that I could no longer entertain a hope. I groaned, when thinking of the fatility, that deprived me of the assistance which Providence seemed to have intended for me.

"Oh! he is an artful titler, this M. de Mortagne," continued M. Lugarto, "he and that de Rochegune—whom may Hell confound!—have been tracking all my steps for the last two months. Hidden in the shade they have overthrown two or three enterprises in which you were concerned, my most lovely enemy! They have bribed some of my people, whom I thought incorruptible. Fortunately Fritz, some time ago, almost knocked out the brains of this de Rochegune, when he used to dance attendance at your garden-gate, to receive information as to your precious health, during your last illness."

"It then was he! Oh, Heaven! M. de Rochegune—it was he! What an assasination!"

"Nonsense! what do you take me for? it was merely a scuffle—a knock on the head with a stick—nothing more. De Rochegune took good care not to talk about it; this philanthropic and virtuous young man, knew, and I knew it also, that had he lodged any complaints regarding it, he would have been compelled to state his reasons for standing sentinel every night at your garden-gate—it might have compromised you—he could not but be silent. It was on this I had reckoned."

"As cowardly, as treacherous and cruel!" I exclaimed, clasping my hands with horror.

"Cowardly! no—but *nervous*—I admit. What would you have? I have the weakness essentially to cling to life; that is natural, for I love *you*, and for *you* I cherish my existence. Speaking of that, you must consider me either a very raw, or a very cold adorer. I have in my power a most lovely woman—undeniably, the most adorable woman in all Paris—and I am quietly relating to her my sharp tricks, instead of speaking of my ardent passion; but do not be impatient; I will explain this conduct, which, perhaps, to you may seem but *too* respectful. You see that clock over the fireplace, do you not? By it 'tis just half past eleven. Well! before midnight you will be enwrapped in a profound and irresistible slumber; at midnight then, you will be in my power. While supping, a short time ago, you swallowed an infallible narcotic. Already, even, you must have experienced some symptoms of drowsiness; and now, while waiting for that happy moment, let us talk.

I uttered a piercing shriek. I recalled to mind the passing stupor which had assailed me, and which I then attributed to fatigue.

"Take pity on me!" exclaimed I, falling on my knees. "This is horrible—infamous!—what have I ever done to you to merit this? Mercy! mercy!"

M. Lugarto burst into a loud laugh, and said, "But madam, what is the matter? what do you ask from me? of what do you complain? Upon my word, it is incredible. Here I am quietly seated in my arm-chair, a long way off from you, contemplating you with most profound respect; and to see you there beseeching, and so dreadfully alarmed, any one would imagine I was behaving like a Tarquin. Come, come, lovely Lucretia, this is not right of you. Do you know that were I a coxcomb, I might think you were reproaching me with my reserve, in order to provoke my audacity?"

I questioned, as it were, my every feeling with intense anxiety. I put my hand to my forehead—it was burning—my head felt heavy, and my eye-lids weighed down. At each of these fatal discoveries, I shook with terror. I was on my knees, and wished to rise, but felt my limbs bend under me.

"But this is not sleep!" I cried; "it is an agony—a living agony—but it is horrible! Oh! my God! my God! is this an illusion—a dream? But, no—no—I again feel my strength failing me. A cloud spreads itself before my eyes. God of heaven! God of justice! wilt thou not come to help me?"

Alas! whether it was that my imagination, impressed by the horrid revelation of M. Lugarto, hastened the effect of the narcotic I had swallowed, or that it was acting naturally, I felt a species of langour and overwhelming heaviness. In spite of myself, I sank into an arm-chair standing near the table upon which my fatal supper had been served. I was seized with a convulsive trembling. I could hardly speak. In my alarm, I made the most supplicating gestures to this monster, which were unheeded.

"I was perfectly sure as to the effect of my poison," resumed Monsieur de Lugarto. "I have already tried it several times. Good—you are now quietly seated—presently you will be altogether incapable of making any movement—but you will for some time to come, understand all that is said to you. Listen, therefore, to me—it will amuse you."

I did, in fact, hear; but, even then, rather imperfectly. It appeared to me, that I was the sport of some terrific dream; my eyes were fixed. This man appeared to me, then, to be endowed with supernatural power. During a moment, he remained silent; he was looking for some papers.

The wind roared in the chimney, with redoubled violence. I felt a growing torpor pervading all my faculties; twice I attempted to rise, to call for help: my strength and my voice failed me.

"I tell you it is useless," said M. Lugarto, shrugging his shoulders; "but listen to me; you are about to know your well-beloved Gontran, and to be informed of the cause of my aversion to him. About two years ago, I discovered, at Paris, in a most owly situation, a pearl of grace—a treasure of rich beauty—a noble heart—an enchanting understanding; in a word, a young and adorable girl; she knew not I was rich. This young girl loved me, but she would in no way transgress the bounds of duty. Stimulated by this resistance, I became so desperately enamored of her—I found her so lovely, so excellent, and so ingenious, that I should have been fool enough to marry her; for her virtue was of that description which attracts rather than repels. The devil brought me into contact with Gontran de Lancry. I became intimate with him. I confessed to him my love—my projects. I presented him to this young girl as my most faithful friend. A month after this introduction, he had supplanted me in her affections. He had revealed my name, falsified my intentions, and seduced this child, until then so pure. The unhappy girl committed suicide, on finding herself, some short time afterward, abandoned by De Lancry. It was thus your husband acted toward me. He blighted—polluted—killed—the only being, whom I had ever truly loved! With one blow, did he for ever ulcerate my heart, and my self-love, in thus disdainfully divesting me of a conquest, which I would have purchased at the price of my own hand. This, I can never pardon; for you could never have fancied the sufferings which this man has caused me."

M. Lugarto appeared to have thrown off, for a moment, his habitual cold and ironical manner; for he uttered these last words with deep and bitter emotion.

"You once, at least, then, have felt a pure and generous sentiment!" exclaimed I; "by virtue of that sentiment: that sacred though cruel recollection, I implore you to take pity upon me. I feel my strength is failing me."

M. Lugarto replied to me by a frightful laugh; and then said, "How very childish you are. All this is very natural. If I make you take a sporific, 'tis that it may take effect. Your lethargy will continue to increase till you are fast asleep. But, to return to De Lancry; although I may have forgotten the young girl, the bitter remembrance that I was sacrificed to Gontran, still rankles in my heart, and fills it with revenge. If I had had the courage at once to fight de Lancry, I think I should have killed him, so deadly was my hatred; but, as I have told you, I am *nervous.* I thought I had better bide my time. *Revenge can be eaten cold,* as the vulgar saying has it; moreover, I know not what mysterious voice whispered in my ear, that sooner or later, Gontran could not escape me. I was in London last year, and he happened to come there, bringing with him the last remains of his shattered fortune. He wished to throw a factitious splendor around him, as a bait to catch and marry some rich heiresses. I went frankly to him; began by laughing heartily at the good trick he had played me, by taking from me that young girl; he laughed also; was delighted to find I looked so calmly on the matter, and we again became sworn and intimate friends. His marriage schemes did not appear to thrive; for I had spread abroad a rumor of his ruin, and of his interested views, adding, that he laughed, by anticipation, at the heiresses whom he expected to catch in his matrimonial net. The aristoratic pride of the young misses of the three kingdoms, revolted against the secret pretensions of this insolent Frenchman, which I had thus unveiled.

"In fine, nothwithstanding his great name, his wit, his handsome person, all advantages which I abhorred, this dear de Lancry could not succeed in marrying, even an obscure city heiress. But I see, your drowsiness keeps on increasing," added M. Lugarto; "but it does not overpower your undertanding. Up to the present time, 't is merely physical heaviness. I shall continue, for I perceive you still understand me. De Lancry, at length, exhausted his resources in fortune hunting; his uncle, the Duc de Versac, having refused to advance him even a penny, he was about to be reduced to sore expedients, when the devil himself inspired him to apply to me; he borrowed money of me; from the first day he did so, he was mine for ever. I lent him a thousand pounds so readily. he knew my fortune to be so immense, that he accepted it without scruple, and returned to the charge. I anticipated, even his desires, and lent him a still larger sum. His head was turned with his success; he thought me an inexhaustible mine.

"I charitably advised him, and altogether for his interest, once more to make a great display of opulence. People had thought him ruined, out and out; they would see him reappear in greater splendour; he might announce some new inheritance, and could not then fail to catch some wealthy heiress. As to expense, I was there to back him; and I had an income of three or four millions of francs. Once richly married, he could repay me my advances. It was a sort of speculation, for which I advanced him funds; and I should not require him to return the money until the profits were realised. I appear very stupid in all this, do I not? for it might happen, after all, De Lancry might not marry suitably, and I was in for all I had lent him; for which by the by, he afterward gave me vouchers which are here. But it was necessary to the success of certain projects which I had combined, and rather adroitly too, that I should inspire him with the blindest confidence in my friendship and generosity. You will see my money was well invested. Every time that I had lent him any considerable sum, I had given him a simple order, signed by myself, upon my banker. Pray, mark this well. One day I suddenly left London, without money at that moment. I managed, that upon a certain evening, a Jew should call on him, and propose, upon his signature, to lend him thirty thousand francs.

"Lancry calculating upon me for the repayment, signed the bond. I was at Brighton, and from thence I watched all his movements. My project was now rife. Gold is a magic wand. Sometime after he had received this loan, I caused to be proposed to Lancry, an heiress whose income exceeded fifty thousand crowns. I knew the relations of this young lady, they had every confidence in me. I guaranteed, on my own fortune, that de Lancry should on his side, bring a fortune of upward of two millions only I requested her relations not to enter into any money questions until my return. From habit, de Lancry always boldly gave out that he was a *millionaire.* He saw the young lady; he was well received, and a day was fixed to regulate all pecuniary arrangements. When it had gone so far, I wrote to de Lancry from Brighton: his answer was a demand for two thousand louis, wherewith to pay the Jew, for the day of payment had arrived. He could be sent to prison on the bond—the creditor was pitiless. It would, indeed, have been terrible to be incarcerated, at the very moment he was about to marry such a fortune, and thus see overthrown such brilliant expectations.

The day preceding that on which the Jew was to be paid, at length arrived. I had calculated every thing. De Lancry was in a state of horrible anxiety. But, oh! miracle from Heaven; oh! blessed manna! an envelope from me arrived, containing an order for two thousand pounds, upon my banker; but not accompanied by any letter, advising the remittance, from me. The order contained only the usual words: *Good for two thousand pounds sterling. Brighton; Count de Lugarto.* I merely wrote a word to de Lancry, telling him I was about to leave Brighton, and that I would let him know shortly where to address me. I had arranged matters so, that the order for the money would arrive in London, in the evening, after banking hours. De Lancry had a valet whom I had recommended to him, and who was devoted to me. De Lancry received the order, put it into a drawer, and went out without taking the key -for order is a thing in which your tender spouse does not particularly shine; the servant, following my directions, took the order, and returned it to me by post. The next morning de Lancry goes to the drawer for the order, and finds there—nothing. He asks his valet what he knows about it? nothing. The latter played his part admirably: he does not know even what his master means. The Jew arrives, and peremptorily insists on being paid: threatens to apply to the family of Gontran's intended, and thus have the marriage broken off. Lancry, in this extremity, seeing himself on the point of losing his heiress, on account of this accursed order, flies into a violent passion, vociferates most loudly against his ill-luck, and in his rage tells his valet, in whom, moreover, he had every confidence, the atrocious perplexity in which he finds himself. My cunning fellow, then, following my instructions, point by point, uses the following arguments with his master: 'The Count de Lugarto sends to my master, the viscount, an order for two thousand louis; he wished then to lend him two thousand louis; now, the viscount has mislaid the order. Where would be the harm if the viscount were to draw up another order?' 'Wretch—a forgery!' 'But as M. Lugarto sent an order to the viscount, and that order is lost, it would be always the same thing. Who would be harmed by it?' Your dear Gontran, after some scruples of conscience, appeared convinced by this fine rhetoric, and an hour afterward presented to my banker a false order, with my name attached to it. But this appears to wake you up," added M. Lugarto, seeing that I rose with a despairing effort.

"It is a lie! a base lie!" cried I, with a feeble voice. "Gontran is incapabable of such infamy!" but overcome by the exertion, I fell back into the chair. From this moment, I experienced a sort of mental hallucination, as M. Lugarto went on speaking. It appeared to me, that I saw all he was describing passing before my eyes. The personages appeared and disappeared, as in a dream, with the rapidity of thought.

"I am so far from lying, when I accuse de Lancry of forgery," rejoined M. Lugarto, showing me a paper, "that here is the order which he forged. I shall continue my story. I have hardly more than will fill up the ten minutes of consciousness which still remain to you. I had some days before confidentially warned my banker, and under a promise of profound secrecy, that de Lancry might, abusing my friendship, present some false order for payment. But from the respect I felt for the family of this unhappy man, I said, I begged my banker to pay the order without making any disturbance about it; but only to keep the order, with clear proof of the crime committed by M. de Lancry, reserving to myself the right of prosecuting him, if this unworthy friend should not amend his life.

"What was said, was done. Witnesses, whose testimony could not be doubted, but whose discretion could be calculated upon, saw de Lancry bring the order and put the money in his pocket. The witnesses, together with my banker, signed a paper detailing all these circumstances—and here it is—in which I have made every necessary statement for its future use. You see that I have only to say one word, to get your husband convicted as a forger

—for it would not be difficult to obtain an order for his being transferred to London."

I hid my face in my hands with horror.

"All this explains to you the secret of my power over de Lancry, and other persons. I have a kind of policy of my own; I put them on the scent of all persons upon whom I wish to act; and it would be singular, if I did not discover in them some tender error, or some sordid action, which delivers them up to me bound hand and foot. You have seen one proof of my skill in this respect, in the Princess de Ksernika and the Duchess de Richeville. But to return to Gontran. Though the Jew who lent the thirty thousand francs, was paid, his marriage with the rich heiress did not take place. I withdrew my guarantee without giving any explanation. De Lancry, upon being called by the family to prove that he possessed the fortune he pretended to, could not prove anything—and as might have been expected, their backs were turned upon him, and he became again as poor as Job; his whole property consisting of the two hundred thousand francs which he owed me. It was paying rather dear for it, but his very soul belonged to me, as Satan would have said. When Lancry saw he was so completely in my power, he fretted and fumed in an outrageous manner; but what could he do? Resign himself, under penalty of being branded!

"It was at this time that he received a letter from his uncle, proposing that he should marry you. This delighted me; my vengeance would be twofold, for I should then have power over two existences, instead of one only? That this scheme, conceived by Mademoiselle de Maran and M. de Versac, might succeed, I lent a hundred thousand francs to de Lancry, to be repaid out of your marriage portion, that he might be able to meet any extra expenses he might incur, and thus prevent his failing in such an excellent affair.

"The marriage took place. I was taken ill in London; but for that, I should have been present at the ceremony, as first-bridegroom's-man. When I recovered, I wrote to de Lancry, who was enjoying his honey-moon at Chantilly. I ordered him to return instantly to Paris. He brought you with him; I saw you, loved you, and determined that you should be mine. Besides, what I will, I will. I declared to your husband, that I should pay my court to you: he submitted to it, though raging furiously. However, I must say, he calculated on your virtue, and he was right; and you have, therefore, obliged me to resort to what the world calls grand expedients. You know all the rest, down to the scene that took place at Tortoni's. His violence carried him away; exasperated by the contemptuous reception of *madame*, he made that furious sally, that ridiculous bravado, at Tortoni's. At two o'clock he was with me, on his knees, weeping, sobbing, beseeching, imploring mercy for himself and you—the galleys were before him—he could not speak or think of anything but the galleys. I once more allowed myself to be persuaded, but on these conditions: First, a duel was absolutely necessary, and I was too *nervous* to fight a real one. It was therefore agreed, it should be *understood*, that we had fought, having soldiers only as our seconds, it should be *understood* also, that I had received a sword-wound, not a very dangerous one. I undertook to have the report spread in such a way, that it should be believed, and this was done in such a way, that I now pass for a regular fire-eater. Second, de Lancry was to set off immediately for London, where he now is. Before his departure, and without giving any reasons for it, I compelled him to write under my dictation, the first letter you received, and which decided you to come here. the other letters were, as you will imagine, written by myself—for your husband is not the only one who can imitate the handwriting of others, or commit forgeries.

"Let me see—have I forgotten anything?—no—nothing. And now, as a little perception still remains with you, consider well the consequences of your position. For the last two months, the world has been persuaded that you and I are on the best terms possible; if any one could doubt it, let them judge of it by facts. You came here of your own free will—you wished to conceal this journey from your aunt, from M. de Versac, and from Madame de Ksernika, for you wrote to them that you were going to visit Madame Secherin, in the country. It is believed your husband wounded me in a duel; it will be thought that you have hastened here immediately after his departure, to console my sufferings—how will you be able to deny it? what proofs can you produce? My forged letters you will say; but presently, when you are sleeping soundly, I will take those letters from you, and will burn them.

Will you invoke the testimony of your servants? First of all, they are paid by me: and they will say, moreover—what is the truth—that they acted by your orders; for you, alone, gave directions for your leaving Paris. But this is not all—to complete this measure of iniquity, one of your relations, a man of great respectability, hearing no doubt your infamous conduct, sets out to follow you, and so prevent your sacrificing your reputation so wantonly—your passion blinds you so completely, that you, abetted by a lackey, cause this respectable pursuer to fall into an abominable trap, where he, perhaps, has lost his life. Well! what say you to all this? I defy the ablest counsellor to contradict a tittle of it, and prevent you from being crushed by these appearances, and covered with lasting ignominy. For I have taken sure means that they should know you have not been at all with Madame Secherin, and that you have come here to take a tender and sorrowful farewell. To-morrow morning—for your sleep will last at least eight or ten hours—I set out for Italy. I leave you to wake up quite at your ease, and to write to Gontran, *poste restante* at London, to come back and console you, if that amuses him. I shall always carry with me this precious forgery—this infernal line, by aid of which, your's and Gontran's souls are firmly held. As to the three hundred thousand francs, which is about the sum your husband owes me—the bills for which are here—to-morrow morning, after my departure, you will find them torn to pieces at your feet, for I am a gentleman, and generous—"

This last infamous threat reanimated the little strength and will which still existed in me. M. Lugarto rose, looked at the time-piece, and said: "In ten minutes you will be senseless!"

Making a desperate effort to raise myself from the arm-chair, I caught sight of a knife. I cannot now recall correctly the violent thoughts which agitated me at that moment. Whether I wished to escape from the dishonour which then threatened me, or whether I imagined that a sudden pain, the loss of blood, perhaps, might arouse me from the frightful state of stupor which benumbed me, I know not. I seized upon the knife, and mustered all my energies to plunge it in my bosom; the blade glanced off and wounded me slightly in the shoulder. This movement was so rapid that M. Lugarto did not perceive it.

A well-known voice cried out, "Hold! Matilda!"

I raised myself quite, with a convulsive movement, and holding out my arms, I made two steps toward M. de Mortagne—for it was he!

He came out from a neighbouring room, and rushed toward me. M. de Rochegune, who accompanied him, with one hand seized M. Lugarto by the collar, and with the other double-locked the door of the room, by which my deliverers had entered.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE PUNISHMENT.

So great was the shock produced upon me by the sight of M. de Mortagne and M. de Rochegune, that I came to myself immediately.

Perhaps, moreover, the slight wound, which I had given myself, had a salutary action, inasmuch as it stood in lieu of a bleeding; for I felt myself almost in my usual state of health.

While M. de Mortagne was dressing this wound, M. de Rochegune was taking possession of the papers of M. Lugarto, who had become pale with consternation.

Then only did I perceive that the face of M. de Mortagne was bruised in many places, and his dress, like that of M. de Rochegune, soiled with mud.

In my first astonishment, I had scarcely considered how entirely providential was my rescue. When I became more calm, I thanked God for my preservation. I played but a mute part in the scene that followed, although it has remained stamped on my memory in characters indeed indelible.

So long as it lasted, although M. de Rochegune was a witness rather than an actor, his dark and stern features wore an expression, perhaps, more terrible than all the passion of M. de Mortagne. Every time that the fixed and ardent gaze of M. de Rochegune fell on M. Lugarto, it seemed to kindle into a light blaze—several times I observed the nervous quivering of his hands, which he made great efforts to keep quiet—but every time that his keen, clear, gray eye, met that of M. Lugarto, the latter seemed to shrink under a sort of painful fascination.

Having attended me with the necessary care, M. de Mortagne seated me in an armed chair, and said to me—

"Now, my poor child, you are about to be a witness of the judgment and execution of this monster!" and as he spoke, he turned toward M. Lugarto.

"But, monsieur, what do you purpose to do with me? You will not take advantage of your strength," cried he, stretching out both his hands in supplication.

"Down on your knees, first of all—down on your knees!" cried M. de Mortagne, in a terrible voice, and with his powerful hand he seized Lugarto by the collar, and violently forced him to kneel down upon the floor.

"But this is a premeditated villainy—an abuse——"

"Silence!" cried M. de Mortagne.

"But——"

"One word more! and I gag you——"

M. Lugarto, overpowered by his terrors, let his head fall upon his breast.

"Listen, now," said M. de Mortagne—"You are about to write to M. de Lancry, that you send back to him the forgery which might have ruined him. It is necessary that he should think you act of your own accord, in restoring this document to him, and that no person is in your confidence—do you understand me?"

Having been downcast for a while, the features of M. Lugarto regained their habitual expression of audacity. Still kneeling, he cast a sidelong glance at M. de Mortagne, and said:

"You take me for a child, sir; you can, indeed, take these papers from me by force; but I defy you to make me write, what you desire me to write."

"Will you not write?"

"No."

"You will not?"

"Once again, no—no!"

M. de Mortagne kept silence, for a moment, casting his eyes about him.

"De Rochegune, give me the cord that loops up that curtain: is it strong?"

"Very strong," said M. de Rochegune, taking a long silken cord from one of the studs.

"What are you going to do?" cried M. Lugarto, half rising from the ground.

M. de Mortagne hurled him back upon his knees.

"To put this cord about your forehead, and compress it, like a tourniquet—the handle of this knife will answer the purpose capitally—and to go on compressing it, till you give in. It is a capital sort of torture, which I have seen practised in the Indies—thanks to it, the hardiest give in!"

"You will not do it," cried M. Lugarto, trembling. "You will not do it. Justice—the law—"

"I will take the responsibility, as concerns justice: it is important for you to write," said M. de Mortagne, with terrific calmness, making a slip-knot as he spoke, in the silken cord.

"But I will not suffer you to do it: but—"

"Look well at me—look at M. de Rochegune; then look at your own paltry person, and then see if you can resist us."

"But——"

"Oh let us finish it—de Rochegune lay hold of his hands.'

The countenance of M. Lugarto, became hideous, between rage and terror: I raised my handkerchief to cover my eyes—a short struggle followed, at the end of which, I heard a piercing outcry, and then these words uttered in a trembling voice.

"Mercy! mercy! I will write."

"Write then," cried M. de Mortagne.

"You take advantage of your strength—you are two to one.'

"Will you write? will you write?"

M. Lugarto submitted, and wrote these lines at M. de Mortagne s dictation.

"I have too long carried on, my dear de Lancry, this miserable joke. I send you back the paper in question; let this secret, henceforth, be between us two. I am much ashamed of all this—I am just setting out for Italy—adieu—ever yours:' and having written this, M. Lugarto signed it.

"I hope this is all," he added; "I yield to violence—but patience—patience!"

"Silence," said M. de Rochegune, "how much does M. de Lancry owe you?"

"Here are the obligations of M. de Lancry, in this pocket-book," said M. de Rochegune; "three hundred and twenty thousand francs."

M. de Mortagne wrote a few lines on a slip of a paper, handed it to M. Lugarto, and said: "here is a draft on my banker, for the same, payable to your order, at sight. You can collect it by your correspondent."

And with the words, he tore up the promissory notes of Gontran.

"But this is infamous—this is an abstraction of documents—but——"

"And that unhappy forgery of Gontran's?" said M. de Mortagne, without answering him.

"It is here," said M. de Rochegune.

M. de Mortagne placed it along with the letter Lugarto had just written to M. de Lancry, and put the two into his pocket-book.

But when Lugarto saw that the means were thus snatched from him of his torturing his victim farther, he uttered a cry of fury, almost like that of a wild beast.

"This is too infamous—this is mere force—malice—violence."

"Do you want me, then, to gag you?" cried M. de Mortagne; "I forbid you to speak, unless I question you. Write again."

"But——"

"De Rochegune, give me the cord."

M. Lugarto raised his eyes to Heaven, and then obeyed, writing what M. De Mortagne dictated.

'I admit that I wrote forged letters to *Madame le Vicomtesse* de Lancry, counterfeiting her husband's writing. In these letters M. de Lancry requested his wife to come to him immediately, at a house situated near Chantilly. Madame de Lancry was deceived by this foul stratagem, and set forth on the moment. On her arrival at the place, she found another letter from M. de Lancry, also counterfeited by myself, in which he entreated her not to be alarmed, but to wait for him until the next day. Madame de Lancry, worn out with fatigue, partook of the supper which I had caused to be prepared for her. I had caused a narcotic mixture to be introduced into every thing that was set before her; and when I perceived that it was about to take effect, I had the brutality to present myself to her—to announce to her that she had taken a narcotic, and to point out to her the increasing power of the drug, affecting her more and more every minute—explaining to her, that at midnight, she would be entranced completely, and so in my power. At this horrible threat, Madame de Lancry preferring death to dishonour, collected all the little strength and power that remained to her, seized a knife and stabbed herself. M. de Mortagne and M. de Rochegune, who had introduced themselves into the house, and who from a hiding-place had witnessed all that passed, burst at this moment, into the room. Being as cowardly, as I am cruel——'

"I will not write that!" said M. Lugarto, throwing down his pen.

M. de Mortagne gave him a violent slap in the face, with the back of his hand. He attempted to rise, but M. de Mortagne seized him and held him down in his chair forcibly, while he said:

"I will prove, to your own satisfaction, although you know it perfectly well without this, that you are a miserable dastard. See! I have slapped your face; I owe you satisfaction for it! Here, then, are pistols loaded; it is clear moonlight in the garden; de Rochegune will be our witness; come!"

And he seized Lugarto by the collar, making a step toward the door, while de Rochegune took up the pistols, which he had laid upon the table when he entered.

M. Lugarto foaming with rage, appeared to be undergoing some strange inward struggle.

"Now then, come;" cried M. de Mortagne, endeavouring to drag him out; "I fancy I shall kill you; for God is just. Come along!"

M. Lugarto rose, took one step, but his terrors overcame his wish for vengeance; he staggered back into his chair, and said with a faltering voice to M. de Mortagne:

"You are an accomplished duellist; you would assassinate me—I——"

"Write then, that you are a coward, or I will break your bones;" cried M. de Mortagne fiercely.

M. Lugarto bowed his head, took up his pen, and went on writing.

"Mark a parenthesis now;" added M. de Mortagne, "'and such a poltroon, that having had my face slapped just this minute by M. de Mortagne:'

"Will you write, as I order you?"

M. de Lugarto hesitated, but quickly making up his mind, he wrote:

'That having had my face slapped just this minute, by M. de Mortagne, I have not even the heart to accept the satisfaction, which he condescended to offer me.'

"Close the parenthesis?"

'I declare and confess the infamies which I am writing, in fear and trembling. I declare, also, that I lured M. de Rochegune into a premeditated plan for his destruction, of which Fritz Muller, a man in my pay, was the instrument, as will be proved by the instructions which will be extorted from him by M. de Rochegune.'

"But," said M. Lugarto; "since I consent to everything—spare me—"

"Will you be silent? now write; 'Done, signed, and delivered as the truth, under the dominion of that terror, which cowards, of my kind, must ever feel in the presence of brave and upright men: *Lugarto*.'"

When he had signed his name, Lugarto cast down the pen, and buried his face in his hands.

"Now listen," continued M. de Mortagne, "to-morrow morning, you will set out for Italy, and I forbid you, do you hear? I forbid you ever again to set your foot in France, without my permission—I banish you!"

"This is all folly!" answered M. Lugarto—"after all, I defy your threats—the law will protect me; I will stay in France just so long as it suits my pleasure!"

"Listen to me," said M. de Mortagne, drawing himself up to the full height of his tall and stately figure, and pressing his hand so heavily on the shoulder of M. Lugarto, that he was forced to bend beneath the pressure of his powerful grasp.

"Listen to me; for these four months past, you have been the evil genius of the most incomparable woman that exists on the earth; you have done all in your power to blast her reputation; to degrade her husband. You have used the most shameless treachery to give credit to your defamatory whispers; you have attempted to assassinate M. de Rochegune; you have committed forgery in order to have Madame de Lancry's letters; you and your accomplices have been, moreover, murderers in design, by entrapping me into a deadly scheme for my slaughter; you have been a poisoner, in administering to this wretched woman drugs which would have enabled you to add a new crime to your former atrocities. All these things you have done! Do you hear! Do you understand me?"

The air, the voice, the accent of M. de Mortagne, were so significant that despite all his impudence, M. Lugarto dared not answer him, and he went on speaking with a loftiness of style that increased as he continued his address, pointing to me the while.

"You know not, then, that I promised her dying mother to watch over her child's welfare, as though she was mine own? You know not, that, had it not been for the interest I felt in discovering the secret of your fatal influence over M. de Lancry, I should long since have driven you out of France; kicking you, like a dog, before me? For you are well aware that when such a man, as I, grows earnest in pursuit of such a wretch as you are, he easily delivers the world of him; which no court of justice can do! Moreover," cried de Mortagne, losing all command of his indignation; "are you not beyond the pale of all law? Am I not, in truth, too pitiful not to kill you, now, like a dog! Have I not the right to do so this instant?"

"The right!" cried M. Lugarto, terrified by the violence of M. de Mortagne.

"Yes! the right! Yes! I have the right to kill you: ay! this instant! Matilda is my near relation. You lured her hither by forged letters! you were about to commit the most execrable outrage on her: I have the proofs of all this—mark you. When I—her friend, her relation, cousin—surprise you in the fact—snatch up a pistol, and with the muzzle to your skull;" and here, suiting the action to the word, he pressed the pistol which he had taken up, against the forehead of Lugarto: "and blow out your brains! well! who would blame me for it? what court would dare condemn me? Are you not taken in the very fact of crime? does not your life belong to me, if I choose to take it, wretch?"

Terrified by the fury of M. de Mortagne, who, carried away by his feelings more and more, seemed to be himself no longer, but still held the cocked pistol within a hand's breadth of his head, M. Lugarto clasped his hands in an agony of terror, and could scarce find the voice to cry—

"Mercy! mercy! For the love of God! take care—it is loaded!" and he let his arms fall down by his side, as if he had lost all sense or feeling.

M. de Rochegune, himself alarmed by the violence of M. de Mortagne, said to him—

"Pity the wretched dog!"

"Did he pity this unhappy child?" replied M. de Mortagne.

"Mercy! oh, my God! I will set forth, wherever you shall order me! I will swear it to you!" murmured Lugarto, in a low faint voice.

"And dare you to swear here? It is not on your word that I reckon, but on my own; and I give you—do you mark me? my word of honour, as a man, that you shall never set your foot in France again. And that for a reason that you shall very shortly know. Since after all you must be punished for your villainies, and since it does not suit my views to do it in the legal way—since after all, you are a forger, murderer, poisoner—and such are branded with hot irons—I, also, will brand you—do you hear me? *I* will! Brand you, not on the shoulder, but on the brow; brand you with a T and an F, so that they may be clearly seen, and for ever. By that means, I hope, you will be prevented from yielding to any temptation to return hither!"

"But this man is the fiend!" exclaimed Lugarto, clasping his hands in agonizing dread, and starting half up from his chair; "have you not insulted me, humiliated me enough? My God! my God! what more will you do with me?"

"I will brand you on the brow: the blade of this knife, heated red-hot in the flame of the candle, will suffice to render the mark indelible."

As he said these words, M. de Mortagne seized the knife, with which I had wounded myself, and approached one of the chandeliers.

M. de Lugarto looked at him in terror, ran to the door—it was locked—returned, cast himself at my feet, exclaiming, in a piteous voice:

"Not that—oh, not that! Oh! Madam, pity me! I have insulted you, I have been cowardly, base, infamous. I will go! I will go! I will never return more. But oh! not that—for pity's sake! not that!"

The features of the man were convulsed with fear—he actually wept—he stretched his hands toward de Mortagne.

He, cold and impassive, stood quite still, heating the knife-blade at the candle.

"But you, Monsieur, you will not be so merciless," cried M. Lugarto, addressing himself to M. de Rochegune. "I did cause you to be attacked treacherously, I confess it—I repent of it—have pity on me—sue for me. But, in the name of God! not that—for life! Only think of that, branded for life on the face—it is too horrible—it is the thought of a fiend!"

M. de Rochegune slightly shrugged his shoulders, but made him no reply.

"But you! madam! you—you—oh! my God! By the memory of your mother, whom you love so dearly—oh! madam, supplicate him for me!"

In spite of myself, in spite of all the agonies I had endured at that man's hands, the barbarity of the punishment seemed revolting to me.

"My friend, my preserver!" I said to M. de Mortagne, "leave him to his remorse—let him go—only let him go!"

"*His* remorse," said M. de Mortagne, "do such men feel remorse? The rage of having his face branded with hot iron, is the sole remorse he can know. Come. Rochegune: the knife is at a white heat—bind his hands!"

"For Heaven's sake! let him go," I cried. "I will not be present at the infliction of so horrible a torture. My friend, I implore you! such vengeance is unworthy both yourself and me."

After a moment, gazing upon Lugarto scornfully, who, between tears and sobs, was murmuring out his prayers for mercy:

"Thanks to the intercession of that angel! for this time I spare you."

"Your hand—oh! your hand—let me kiss your hand!" cried M. Lugarto, dragging himself, on his knees, to M. de Mortagne.

But he drew quickly back, and spurned him with his foot, saying: "But I swear to you, if you ever dare to return to France, what I do not now, I will then do. You ought to know me well enough, to be sure that I shrink from nothing. I, with two resolute men, are at any time enough to do it—and I can seize you easily."

"I promise you, I will leave France never to return. All is prepared for my departure. My carriage will be here to-morrow. At daybreak I will set off for Italy. Day and night I will travel, till I am out of France. I swear it to you!" he exclaimed, his teeth actually chattering in his head from terror.

"Matilda, my child, you must be in need of rest," said M. de Mortagne, addressing me; your lady's maid is there; you have no more to fear. Come, Rochegune will keep watch over this dog. To-morrow, when you shall be composed a little, we will tell you how we discovered his infamous designs."

I followed the advice of my friend, retired to the chamber prepared for me, and soon fell into a deep and tranquil slumber.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE FAREWELL.

The following morning, at my awakening, my first thought was, that I had dreamed a hideous dream; but the keen pain, which my wounds gave me, recalled to my mind the terrible scene of the past night.

My first movement was again to return thanks to God, who had saved me and restored Gontran to me. The odious mysteries which had so long afflicted me were now cleared up. I no more feared that now, tranquil and serene, my husband would be all to me that he had been in the first days of our married life.

I attributed to the baneful influence of M. Lugarto, all the anxieties that Gontran had caused me. Was it not in obedience to the orders of his evil genius, that he had paid attention to Madame de Ksernika?

At first, I confess, I was afraid to let my mind dwell on the fatal deed which had put M. de Lancry in the power of Lugarto.

Nevertheless, wishing to put an end to these doubtful reflections, I resolved to investigate boldly the conduct of Gontran. I strove to palliate his guilt by every argument that I could think of.

Alas! my principles were naturally of too firm a character to allow me to find any medium between stern condemnation or an approval which would itself be guilty.

I condemned Gontran.

For a moment, I was almost alarmed at finding that this discovery, dreadful as it was, had not the slightest effect upon my love for M. de Lancry. I was astonished at finding myself capable of loving a man passionately, who could be guilty of such an action.

I wept his fault bitterly. It was grievous to me to feel myself his superior—to have, not to reproach, but to *pardon* him the commission of a baseness. This feeling became so keen, so torturing, that, by a strange sort of paradox, which I can hardly explain to myself to-day, I strove hard to convince myself that, had I been in Gontran's situation, I should have done as he did—I, who had been unable to discover one honourable cause for his dishonourable action.

I know not how I can describe to you my pleasure, when, after deep reflections, each more paradoxical than the other, I succeeded in convincing myself of this moral partnership in his guilt—with what triumphant happiness I succeeded in proving to myself that I had no right to blame Gontran.

Doubtless there was, in this singular self-assurance on my part, a kind of retrospective thought of self-sacrifice, and self-denial, of which I had taken no account, but which still guided me in secret.

When I went down into the drawing-room, I there found M. de Rochegune. He blushed, and told me that M. de Mortagne had gone out to give some orders relative to my departure.

"I was yesterday in so much pain and so much grief, monsieur," said I to him, "that I had scarcely power to express all my gratitude to you. You and M. de Mortagne have been my saviours. Nor do I forget that, during my illness——"

"I conjure you, madam, let us say no more of this. You have permitted me to call myself your friend. I have but acted as a friend."

Ah! monsieur, how can I ever be sufficiently grateful!——"

"By permitting me always, madam, to retain that precious title—by permitting me always to deserve it."

I know not wherefore, but at this moment it entered my head, that, knowing the guilty secret of M. Gontran, M. de Rochegune might think himself perhaps, justified in judging very harshly of my husband.

By one of those singular coincidences of thought of which there are so many examples, M. Rochegune added, almost at the same moment, "And when I pray you, madam, to be permitted to count myself in the number of your friends, I dare to believe that you will not forget how happy I shall always feel *to be enumerated among the friends* of M. de Lancry."

I observed that M. de Rochegune intentionally laid a strong stress on the last words. I thought the assurance they contained so delicately generous, it replied so nobly to my fears, that I could not help crying out, eagerly,

"Oh, thanks, monsieur! thanks for myself and him!"

M. de Rochegune, surprised by this movement, looked hard at me. Our eyes met. We understood each other.

He understood my gratitude, as I understood his kindness towards Gontran. A sweet, sad smile played round his lips, and he said:

"Life has indeed, madam, some noble pleasures. It is too easy to do good, when compared with the pleasure we derive from doing it."

A silence of some minutes followed these words of M. de Rochegune. I was a good deal confused; yet, by chance, I raised my eyes to his face; his looks were wandering and abstracted; he seemed to be in a deep reverie; his countenance, usually severe and even haughty, wore an expression of ineffable benevolence; his black hair scarcely covered the recent scar of a deep flesh wound which he bore on the forehead, and which I had remarked, when he came to see me the first time after my illness.

In spite of myself, my eyes filled with tears, as I thought that I had been the involuntary cause of the attempt to assassinate M. de Rochegune, while he was coming to inquire after my poor Blondeau. Wishing to break the silence, which was becoming awkward, I said:

"You feel no more pain from the wound which you received?"

As he heard my voice, M. de Rochegune started, but answered quickly:

"I feel no more pain, madam;" and then, as if the tone of the conversation had been painful to him, he said, in a marked tone—

"All my fear now is that the wretch Lugarto, although out of France, may avenge himself on M. de Mortagne."

"How so?"

"This morning that man departed. M. de Mortagne thought it advisable to see him to the carriage, and impose on him a last injunction. 'Remember,' he said, with a threatening gesture—'I shall remember but too well for your safety,' answered M. Lugarto, 'at whatever distance I may be, I will find means to reach you;' and then shaking his fist at M. de Mortagne, he ordered his postillions to set off at the gallop. Oh! madam, it was impossible to imagine anything more terrible than the face of this man, as he uttered that last threat. Hatred, vengeance, terror, and rage were painted there in the most frightful blending."

"Great God!" I exclaimed, "he is capable, even in a foreign land, of plotting some infernal stratagem against M. de Mortagne. That man, in his vast wealth, finds endless means of accomplishing his desperate schemes."

"I share your fears, madam," replied M. de Rochegune, "and, unfortunately, I am obliged to leave M. de Mortagne. Without that, I would have watched over his life, as over that of my father."

"Whither then, monsieur, are you going?"

"To Greece, madam, to war against the Turks. It is a noble and a holy cause; and moreover, at this moment I want activity, excitement."

"It is, they say, a fearful war—without mercy or pity," I said to M. de Rochegune, with much interest.

"It is a war, madam, like all other wars," he answered with a melancholy smile. "We are slain, or slay others! In this war, however, we die, if we do fall, for a generous and heroic nation; and such a death is, in itself, grand and noble."

"These are too sad presentiments," I answered; "dwell not upon them. I have the hope—the confidence, indeed, that you will return safe to your friends."

"I have the same conviction, madam. We have not the right to be indifferent to life, so long as we have the least chance of being useful to those whom we love or respect."

At this moment M. de Mortagne entered, apparently much irritated.

"I have just learned another villainy of this Lugarto. Your lady's-maid, whom I have been terryfying with questions and threats, admits that she was placed near your person by that villain; and that, in order to prevent Blondeau from accompanying you—wretch that she is—she put some powder or other, by Lugarto's orders, into her food, which made Blondeau so ill that she was unable to follow you."

"My dear friend, M. de Rochegune tells me that as he was setting off, M. Lugarto—"

"Yes! yes! he threatened me. I expected some diabolical plot or other, but I shall be on my guard. All that I wished was to rid you of him; and in that, I think, I have succeeded. I am sorry, nevertheless, that I did not brand him; it would have been one safeguard more."

"And one motive the more, also, for the hatred and the vengeance of this man," said I.

"Oh! if we hesitate for such fears as that," answered M. de Mortagne, "we should never act at all. I know right well with whom I have to contend. But now I must tell you how I traced out this abominable machination. Some time after your return from Chantilly, I learned through de Rochegune, the infamous slanders he was circulating about you. I was ill, and unable to go out. The first idea of M. de Rochegune was to go straight to Lugarto, and order him to hold his tongue. He knew him of old; was aware that he was a great coward, and entertained no doubt but that a vigorous threat would intimidate him. I prevailed on him not to do so; I had written to London to gain some information concerning the life which M. de Lancry had led there before his marriage."

Here, seeing that the conversation was about to turn upon M. de Lancry, with a feeling of propriety, the exquisite delicacy of which I appreciated duly, M. de Rochegune turned to M. de Mortagne, saying, "I have some orders to give concerning our departure. For a while I will leave you."

He bowed to me, left the room, and as soon as he was gone, M. de Mortagne took up again the thread of his narrative.

"They wrote me word from London, that M. de Lancry had spent a great deal of money; and that, according to public report, that money had been lent to him by M. Lugarto. Putting this information together with other circumstances, it was easy to perceive that M. de Lancry was in the power of this man. Without, however, knowing how absolute and how perilous that power had been rendered by the commission of the action of which you are aware, I induced de Rochegune then to keep quiet, and to wait for my recovery. A very faithful man of mine, who has lived with me twenty years, got some of Lugarto's servants to gossip; and from them I learned that M. de Lancry, when closeted with their master, had been heard frequently to implore him not to destroy him. This information satisfied me that there was something more in question than a mere debt of money; and I resolved, at whatever cost, to ferret out the secret, and to put you in safety from the vile doings of Lugarto, who, it seems, knew my affection for you. I very soon found out that I was watched; for this man, by dint of lavish expenditure, has built up for himself a sort of police, by means of which he discovers all sorts of secrets, which he uses or abuses as occasion offers, as you have seen in the case of Mademoiselle de Ksernika and Madame de Richeville. To avert his suspicions, I left Paris. His spies lost all trace of me. That was about the period of your illness. After a few days, I returned to Paris, and established myself in an out-of-the-way quarter of the town, whence I watched all the motions of Lugarto. I know as well as he, that rogues are corruptible; so as almost all his people have been accomplices in some one or other of his base or shameful actions, it was in my power to bribe some of his servants. So that, ere long, I learned that within a short time he had hired and furnished a lonely house near Chantilly—that in which we now are. I came to assure myself of the fact in person, and reconnoitered the situation of the building. I knew that Lugarto had a detestable facility of forging letters. Fearing some trick, I caused you to be warned by de Rochegune, never to quit your husband, judging that Lugarto would choose the opportunity of his absence, to let off some villainous plot against you. The scene occurred at Tortoni's. I went to your house, and was informed that you had gone to visit Ursula, and that your husband had also set out upon a journey. I went to Lugarto's house, and learned that his people answered, that he was confined to his bed by a sword-wound, received the same morning. I knew my man. I did not believe much about the sword-wound; and I was struck especially by your separation from Gontran. One hour's delay or hesitation might have ruined all. If you had really gone to Madame Secherin's, there was no danger, so we had nothing to do with that supposition. We resolved, therefore, to come hither at all risks. We should have overtaken you on the steep descent by Luzarches, when this devil of a man caused us to be upset into a heap of paving stones. The shock was horrible. I remained for some minutes stunned and insensible."

"My good friend! oh! Heaven! and for me—for me always, all these risks are run!"

"These accidents count for nothing, my dear child, unless when they cause us to arrive too late. This time—thanks be to Heaven! it was not so. After a stupor of a few minutes, I came to myself. I had escaped—as had de Rochegune likewise—with a few hard bruises. But our horses were incapable of moving—our postillion's leg was broken—our carriage was shattered. We counted our time to a second. On foot, it would require an hour to reach the place: we set out. Happily, at the end of a quarter of an hour, we met the horses, which had carried you, returning. By the intelligence which we derived from the postillions, there could be no more doubt that it was you. We took—de Rochegune and I—the two saddled post-horses, and started at full gallop. In half an hour, we reached the house. To avoid suspicion, we left our horses at a little distance. All the windows were shut closely, but we could see light through the shutters. We had determined to knock violently at the door, when suddenly a window on the ground floor was thrown open; it was your maid, who wished, I suppose, to take the fresh air. We could see, in the servant's hall, an old woman and Fritz: one spring carried us, pistol in hand into the hall; de Rochegune stood to the door, I to the window. Those wretches fell on their knees, dumb with fear."

"There must be a wood-house, a cellar somewhere near," said I; "lead us to them, or we blow out your brains!" "To the right, under the vestibule, is the cellar door," said the old woman.

"Five minutes afterward, Fritz and the two women were safe under lock and key. We entered the ante-chamber, next to the drawing-room in which you were—we heard voices—it was Lugarto, revealing to you his villainous machinations. These revelations might serve us; we waited till the moment when you, poor creature, so bravely stabbed yourself."

"Noble and generous friend!" I exclaimed, grasping M. de Mortagne's hands in mine. "Ever nigh! ever on the spot! when I can be assisted—rescued!"

"Ever on the spot—surely," he replied, "without you what interest should I have in life? But, mark me, my sweet child, this very day we must put this letter, for your husband, into the post-office. He will find it in London on his arrival. It will convey to him this unhappy forgery, and will restore to him his liberty. To overthrow this villainous plot of Lugarto's altogether, and to explain your leaving Paris, in order that your husband may have no suspicion of what has passed this night, you must set off directly for the estate of M. de Secherin. Once there, you can write to your husband, that not choosing to remain in Paris without him, you have gone to pass the time of his absence with Ursula. This letter you will direct to your own house, in Paris, where he will find it on his return."

"But, my good friend, why not tell the whole to Gontran?"

"Why not, my child? because, the instant your husband should discover that you knew the base crime which he has committed, he would hate you!—he would be forced to blush before you—and he would never forgive you *his own fault!*"

"Can you believe it?"

"Listen, Matilda: I will make no accusations. I will see in M. de Lancry only the man you love. Your generous and holy affection shall be to me his safeguard; but, in a word, be just—when he saw you wretched, in consequence of this odious intimacy, with a man whom he despised, whom he hated as much as you did—had he the courage to make that sad confession to you? No! he preferred to let the most apalling calumnies go forth about *you*, and be credited!"

"But, to break openly with M. Lugarto, would have been his destruction."

"But would have saved your reputation, hapless woman—innocent as you were of all these villainies. If your husband had not been a miserably selfish creature, he would have boldly braved all consequences, rather than let you be villified in the world's eye! And yet, after the scene at Tortoni's, which did at least show that he retained one spark of generous indignation—did he not once again subscribe to all the requirements of Lugarto? Did he not leave you, dastardly, to the peril of all his base attempts against you? Ay! Matilda—poor, dear child! it needs all the respect, all the admiration with which your devotedness inspires me, to prevent me from saying what I think. I will not grieve you farther; only put faith in my experience—never tell Gontran that you have his secret. I repeat it to you—the man who, under such fearful circumstances as you were placed, had not the confidence to intrust you with the whole, would be indeed pitiless, if he knew that you had discovered what he kept so obstinately secret."

"But again: if, by chance, Gontran should learn that I have stopped at this house?"

"Of that, too, I have taken heed. I ever fancied, that, in some new freak of wickedness, Lugarto might write the whole to your husband; though I can see no object in his doing so. Then would this declaration, signed by himself, with my testimony, and that of de Rochegune, suffice to place you beyond the reach of any calumny—for we must think of everything."

"I will take your advice," said I to M. de Mortagne, with a sigh. "Nevertheless, I must own to you, that it gives me much pain to conceal anything from Gontran."

M. de Mortagne, without answering, took me by both hands, and looked at me for some moments, without speaking. His face, so strongly marked, and full of stern character, wore now an expression of indescribable sensibility. He could not control his tears. You cannot imagine how much I was affected, at seeing tears in the eyes of that man of iron energy and resolution.

"Heavens! what is the matter with you, dearest friend?" I cried, bursting, myself, into tears.

"I do not see you entirely happy for the future, my poor child. Your husband is delivered from a terrible tyranny; your fortune is restored. M. de Lancry has done you bitter wrong, which he has yet to repent; and repentance makes souls better which are naturally good. And yet I fear, and am not reassured."

"These are vain terrors, dearest friend. Your tenderness for me is wrongly terrified, believe me."

"Alas! I trust that I may be mistaken," said M. de Mortagne, shaking his head mournfully.

"By the way," said I, "this sum which you have paid for us is very large. It is understood, is it not, that we are to repay it?"

"Hear me, Matilda. I have about sixty thousand livres annual income. During the years which Mademoiselle de Maran caused me to spend under the leads in Venice, I was obliged to be economical in my own despite. I have few wants; I employ almost all my leisure in comforting the good who sorrow in obscurity. I shall have no heirs but you; so that is but an advance of your inheritance."

"And yet, my friend——"

"Mark me yet farther. Your marriage contract was drawn up so unfairly, that you, who brought the whole fortune, have kept no right or power in reserve; so that your husband can ruin you, or rob you, at his pleasure. Luckily, here am I. My fortune will save you from want in future."

"My dear friend, have no fears. I assure you, Gontran has recovered from his extravagant tastes. He plays no more."

"The household you kept up at Paris was much too large for your fortunes. I am sure, that, as soon as he finds himself freed from M. Lugarto, M. de Lancry will launch ont again into absurd expenses. You have now clear, after your hotel is paid for, a hundred thousand francs a year. Yet, in five or six years, you may find yourself completely ruined. I know these spendthrifts!"

"But, my friend——"

"But, my dear child, he was not deterred, or even checked, by the shame of committing a forgery, in order to procure money. What curb, then, will there be on him, when he has nothing to do but to draw out of your fortune by whole handsful? Pardon me, Matilda, if I grieve you; but these are severe truths, which must be spoken. I have never shrunk from this duty; I never will shrink from it. Resist, I conjure you, as much as you can, the prodigality of your husband; hold fast to this resolution for yourself, as for him. I will not speak to him; I will keep my influence for the last. He is violent, passionate, and impatient of reproof; little for that care I. When your interest shall command me to speak, speak I will; and speak so as to be heard and listened to; I'll answer for it! And now, farewell, my child, On the slightest incident, write to me at Paris. Above all, reckon upon me for ever, and upon de Rochegune. As for him, may God preserve him to me; for he is going into a fearful war, and he is not the man to spare himself. Farewell! once more, farewell! I will send Blondeau to you at Madame de Secherin's. One of my men, who accompanied me yesterday, and has just come up with my carriage, shall follow you. You can take with you, for the present, this woman, whom you brought hither; but as soon as Blondeau arrives, discharge her; and on your return to Paris, make a clear house of all your people, lest any dangerous creature of Lugarto's should be still left among them. Then re-establish your household only with servants perfectly well recommended."

I gave that excellent friend one last embrace, and, with many tears, bade him farewell. I pressed M. de Rochegune's hands affectionately, and set off for Touraine, making myself quite happy in the idea of surprising Ursula with this unexpected visit.

CHAPTER XX.

THE SECHERIN FAMILY.

The estate of M. Secherin, on which I was then living with Ursula, was situated at Rouvrai, in Touraine, on the banks of the Loire. I was obliged to return through Paris, and I stopped there, in order myself to put the letter of M. Lugarto to Gontran into the post—that letter, which would overwhelm my husband with delight, and deliver him from the baneful influence under which he had been so long suffering.

It was near the end of June.

I travelled very rapidly; and, in proportion as I receded from Paris, it seemed that I breathed more freely. The sight of the glowing plains through which I was passing, calmed me and did me good. My heart seemed to expand; I was about, once more, to behold the friend of my childhood.

After so many cruel shocks, I was about to taste the tranquil pleasures of the country, and I was enchanted with the prospect of partaking, for a time, the peaceable and simple life of Ursula and her husband.

For a long time I had received no letter from my cousin. In the last, she had written to me, she continued to bewail her lot; but she endured with a melancholy resignation.

I knew the high and romantic character of Ursula, and the goodness of her husband; therefore I was not much alarmed.

I had not written her a word of all that had for some time so broken up the course of my life. I resolved to make her no confidence on the subject—this was not my secret, it was Gontran's likewise.

I arrived at Rouvrai, by the light of a beautiful setting sun, on a lovely summer's evening. I passed on the left hand some large buildings, in which were the manufactories of M. Secherin, and entered a fine avenue of lindens, which led to the dwelling-house.

Scarce had my carriage reached the middle of the avenue before I discovered Ursula. I stopped the horses, sprang out of the carriage—in an instant I was in the arms of my cousin.

"Now is this you? is this indeed you?" she said; "what a sweet surprise!"

"Ursula! yes! it is I—I, your sister. I have come to pass a few days with you, which are at my own disposal, while my husband is in England."

"What a charming idea you have had, Matilda; how grateful am I for it. What a pity it is that our poor house is so unworthy to receive you."

I shrugged my shoulders with a smile.

"And your husband, where is he? how go things with him?"

"Very well," replied Ursula.

After these first greetings, I looked at my cousin more attentively; she seemed to me to have grown prettier than ever.

"You are happy, I am sure, for you look lovely."

"Happy?" she answered, with an accent, which became on a sudden very plaintive; "yes, I am happy!" and she controlled a rising sigh. "But it is to you—to you that one should speak of happiness."

"Yes! yes!" I cried, "especially at this moment; you cannot conceive how charmed I am at seeing you again. You cannot conceive how much enjoyment I expect in these days passed with you."

I had taken the arm of Ursula while I was speaking, and we were going toward the house, which was large, though old-fashioned. The garden round it, which was laid out symmetrically in squares and quincuples, and inclosed by long alleys of yoke-elms, clipped formally in the old French style, had a singular air of calm tranquillity, which was, if anything, increased by a glimpse of the broad, quiet, Loire, seen at the end of one of those cool verdant aisles which opened on a terrace.

"Do you not think this place very provincial, very vulgar?" said Ursula. "M. Secherin, or his mother, rather, will not consent to the smallest change, under the pretext that everything has been thus since the time of the late M. Secherin, which does not prevent it from being, as you see, quite hideous. And this frightful French garden, too, is it not just like the garden of a convent? How sad and gloomy it is."

"No, indeed; you are unjust to the place, my dear Ursula. I think this garden very fine and very noble; and then you have, if I am not mistaken, a terrace on the Loire. Do you count that for nothing?"

"Always indulgent, always kind, poor dear Matilda."

"No, truly; I assure you that everything here delights me. It is so calm, so tranquil."

"Oh! as for calmness, there is enough of that. Luckily, we cannot hear the stunning noise of M. Secherin's manufactories."

"These are the great buildings which I saw as I came in, are they not? It must be a magnificent establishment."

"Magnificent! What? a manufactory! there can be nothing in the world so gloomy, unless it is the constantly hearing of the miraculous profits of that same manufactory—of the number of workmen it employs—of its importance to the country and the like. You will have to submit, my poor Matilda, to listen constantly to such conversations. What a change for you, accustomed to the brilliant world of Paris, of which, alas! I had but a glimpse before burying myself alive here."

I laughed at Ursula with a reproachful expression.

"My sister, my dear sister! I fear that I shall have to scold you very roundly. I am sure that you belie your own sense of happiness. Believe me, the world—that world of which we entertain such glittering ideas—is, when you see it closer, false, gloomy, and malicious. How much should I prefer the peaceable existence which you lead here, to its fallacious glitter."

Ursula looked at me with astonishment. "You," she said, "you envy my lot! is it possible then, Matilda, that you can be unhappy? What has befallen you? Have you concealed anything from me?"

"No, my dear Ursula," I hastened to reply, "but I assure you that the pleasures of the world occupy indeed, but do not satisfy the heart. You know that even at Mademoiselle de Maran's I was always a bit of a hermit. I preferred passing my evenings in our room with you, to staying in the drawing-room."

"How truly I recognize your goodness—your habitual delicacy," replied Ursula. "You pretend to envy my lot in order to make me think it enviable. But come, let me lead you to your room—you will excuse the modesty of your entertainment."

We entered the house; everything in it was extremely plain, but kept with the most wonderful neatness. We ascended a great flagged staircase with a balustrade of massive wood-work, leading to a long corridor upon which several doors opened.

One of these Ursula threw open, and passing through a little antechamber, I found myself in a large room with old-fashioned gray wainscoting. At the farther end was a canopied bedstead with curtains of Persian silk, with red Chinese figures on a white ground. Over the doors and chimney-piece there were panels painted after the taste of Watteau. Trees of bright green, a brilliant azure sky, shepherdesses in rose-coloured petticoats, shepherds in sky-blue coats, with snow-white sheep at their feet, all bedecked with great bows of ribbon.

I cannot say how much these pastoral scenes delighted me; they were, it is true, not a little stiff and formal, but the smiling and peaceful calm of the country soothed my agitated mind almost miraculously. Great windows with little diamond panes opened upon the garden, and overlooked the Loire. A wardrobe, and writing-desk of Indian wood inlaid with green and rose-coloured marquetry, and other furniture painted gray, and covered with red and white Persian, completed the decorations of the room.

Ursula appeared ashamed of the simplicity which delighted me. I thought nothing could be gayer or more lightsome. Two other apartments, ornamented in the same taste, one of which could be used as a sitting room, completed the suite.

"Tell me the truth," said Ursula, "shall you not find yourself too poorly accommodated?"

"I shall be so comfortable, that if M. de Lancry will only stay here a little while, when he comes to fetch me away, I can tell you that you will have some trouble in getting rid of me."

"Well, I believe you, my sweet Matilda. All my fear is, that you will soon grow tired of this life, which you so bedeck with your imagination. I am afraid, also, that the society of my mother-in-law, Madame de Secherin, will be insupportable to you."

"But your husband says she is the best of women."

"Sons are always indulgent. You will see her. She has not a spark of wit; is mannerless; bigotted in the extreme; obstinate to a degree that would be called firmness of character, if she had as much understanding as she has resolution. Neither her son, nor I, have ever been able to induce her to make the slightest change in the house, to increase the number of our servants, or to improve in any way the establishment. Her eternal strain is, '*My poor late husband Secherin, thought it quite well enough as it is.*' So you, Matilda, who, I hear, have one of the best and most elegant establishments in Paris, must not ridicule us," said Ursula, blushing and quite confused, "when you see us waited upon at table by two great awkward country girls of Touraine. It is a rage of my mother-in-law, which nothing can induce her to give up."

I looked at my cousin without having the power to conceal my displeasure and my sorrow.

"How! Ursula, do you know me so little as to think I could ever observe such trifles? Do I not think, above everything, of the pleasure of being with you!"

It struck seven of the clock.

"I am going to send your lady's maid to you, quickly," said Ursula. "Madame Secherin sups at eight exactly. Yes—*sups!*—Nothing can make her alter her gothic customs, and if you were not ready, she would not have the manners to wait for you."

"I should be in despair, Ursula, to be late. For perhaps your mother-in-law might think my unpunctuality a mark of disrespect—you know nothing can be more respectable in a family than family habits!"

Ursula left me, and I was in truth deeply grieved at the fears, and uneasy observations of my cousin—she seemed almost humiliated, not to say spiteful, at the simplicity of her means of receiving me; and it really looked as if she thought more of her own vanity than of my comfort.

I now remember, too, that my cousin, even while she was loudly proclaiming her joy and happiness at seeing me again, yet appeared somewhat out of sorts at my arrival. At the time, I attributed her restraint to the foolish causes I have enumerated; I now know the true and wretched cause of her embarrassment.

I dressed very quickly and as simply as I could, and was ready when Ursula knocked at my door.

"You will excuse my mother-in-law for not having come to welcome you, but she walks with some difficulty, and it would have been very painful to her to come up stairs. My husband has just arrived from the factory, and will join us in the drawing-room forthwith."

"Come down quickly—for I am determined to make a conquest of your mother-in-law," I answered Ursula, laughing.

"Oh! you will find that no easy matter—I had enough to do, telling her of your rank, the position of your husband, your elegance, and your wealth; for she did not appear disposed to be more liberal in her preparations for you, than she would have been for some citizen's wife of our subprefecture. You will excuse this want of education, will you not?"

"On the contrary, instead of finding anything to excuse, that simplicity gives me a yet better opinion of your mother-in-law, my dear Ursula. Decidedly, I must contrive to please her."

We descended the staircase, entered a drawing-room in which the table was laid, and then a parlour in which Madame Secherin was sitting. I remember the small particulars of the scene, for I was struck by the sort of harmony that existed between Madame Secherin, and the objects that surrounded her.

I had so lately been exposed to all sorts of tumultuous agitations, that I naturally found an excessive charm in everything that could bring to my mind ideas of repose and tranquillity.

The windows and glass doors of that parlour opened upon a boudoir literally enamelled with flowers—a chandelier of rock crystal, carefully covered with white gauze, hung from a large beam which crossed the ceiling—here and there several gilt frames, their only ornament, hung on the dark wainscoting, containing studies of heads in crayon, drawn by the husband of Ursula, while he was at the College of Tours, and presented to his parents on their birth-days, as was testified by long dedications in magnificently flourished writing.

On the marble mantlepiece, stood a clock and candelabras, of gilt bronze, covered like the chandelier with gauze—two brackets of mahogany were placed between the windows, large sofas, and several arm-chairs covered with draperies of white dimity, completed the furniture of that apartment, which was paved with red tiles, brightly polished with wax, and exquisitely clean. Madame Secherin was sitting on a couch placed in the recess of one of the open windows, over which hung a thick-clustering mass of rose bushes in full bloom. A large old grey parrot with a red collar, was walking gravely on the threshold of the window.

Ursula's mother-in-law was spinning with a distaff, to the monotonous sound of her wheel. She was a woman of about seventy years, dressed in a black gown, with a sort of country-cap of lawn, without any trimming, which sat closely round her pale brow and her sunken and wrinkled cheeks.

At first sight, her countenance appeared merely simple, sweet, and grave; but, on examining it with more attention, it was easy to distinguish an expression of great firmness; while her calm eye, deep and observant at the same time, showed a long habit of scrutinizing penetration.

I was persuaded, instantly, that Ursula misjudged her mother-in-law; and what convinced me, above all, that Madame Secherin was not a vulgar woman, was, that she received me calmly, with a dignified affability which was entirely unembarrassed. When I entered the room, she stood up with difficulty, leaning on the arm of her couch, and, saluting me affectionately, said—"You are very kind, madam, to have come to see my daughter-in-law. We will do all that we can, both my son and myself, to render your stay here agreeable."

"How should it be other than agreeable, madam," I answered, "when I am with a sister whom I love dearly—whose husband I esteem sincerely—and when you receive me with cordiality such as leads me to hope for even more."

"I feel very much disposed to love you. My son has told me that you are a good and gentle lady; good people easily love those who are likewise good; and I hope that you will be pleased with us."

"I have no doubt of it, madam."

"We make no pretensions," said Madame Secherin. "We live in the old-fashioned style"—placing herself at her spinning-wheel again, as she spoke—"as we did in my husband's time. I have not been able to bring myself to depart from those customs, which were his for so many years."

"I can perfectly comprehend, madam," I replied, "the religion, if it may be so styled, of memory; and I admire it. Thus, although the absence of a beloved being is felt the more deeply, there is no bitterness in those regrets; they are continually soothed by the hope we entertain, of being one day again united to those whose loss we deplore."

Madame Secherin looked at me for a moment, with an air of interest, and answered—"Good hearts have a mutual intelligence with each other." She sighed, kept silence for a few moments, and then said, as if desirous of changing the subject—

"These are our habits in Touraine, madam. We breakfast at nine o'clock, dine at two, sup at eight, and are in our beds by ten: for look you, who rise early, must to bed betimes. My son is afoot by cock crowing, and cannot, therefore, sit up late."

Ursula looked at me with an expression almost of supplication, and shrugged her shoulders, as she looked toward her mother-in-law, fearing, I suppose, that I should be shocked at the simple familiarity with which Madame Secherin received me. I was, however, quite on the contrary, charmed with her manner, which, although plain, I thought very lady-like.

There is nothing more low-bred, common-place, or vulgar, than noisy and bustling anxiety to please; than humble protestations, and exaggerated regrets at only being able to receive *persons of the capital*, (that style of the sub-prefecture, as Mademoiselle de Maran called it,) in poor provincial fashion.

At this moment, M. Secherin entered in a hurry, and, appearing delighted to see me, came up with open arms to embrace me. His manner was so natural and cordial, that I offered my two cheeks to him, not without smiling, and blushing a little also.

M. Secherin made the whole parlour echo with the two great kisses he gave me, to the extreme embarrassment of Ursula, who could not refrain from saying to him, in an undertone.

"Upon my honour, sir, I think you must be mad! what manners! Pray, forgive him, Matilda."

"What do you mean—how! what manners?" said he—"is it because I kiss my cousin heartily on both cheeks? Upon my word, I am enchanted to see her—and this is my way."

"Do you not see that Ursula is jealous, my dear cousin?" I replied laughingly; but he seemed to reflect for a moment or two on the words of Ursula; for in a minute he said to me, with an embarrassed, and, indeed, almost sad expression—"After all, my wife is perhaps in the right. I am doubtless wrong, cousin. Excuse me, but I was so glad to see you, that I did not consider whether it was proper for me to kiss you."

"I have a great mind to beg you to begin again, my dear cousin, in order to teach Ursula not to scold so unjustly."

"Really! are you not angry then?" cried M. Secherin, whose face seemed to expand with pleasure.

"Do I look so?" said I.

"How good you are—Heavens! how good you are! just like your excellent aunt, Mademoiselle de Maran; and, by the way, how is that admirable lady?"

"Oh! very well," I answered, though not without my share of embarrassment, exchanging a glance with Ursula.

"Ah! mother," M. Secherin went on enthusiastically, "you have no notion what a fine woman Mademoiselle de Maran, the aunt of Madame de Lancry, is. She is ever as a summer's day. In fact, in a word, she is as much like you in character as two drops of water can be. In that respect, mother, she is the very picture of you."

"So you have always told me, my son, and I believe you."

"And I shall say so always. Look you, Madame de Lancry can tell you that, the very first time I ever saw her, Mademoiselle de Maran began to talk to me at once just as you would have done. She found little faults with me; she even lectured me somewhat, for saying things which I should not have said; and that sort of frankness is so rare—is it not, mother?"

"Old folks owe the lessons of their experience to the young. It is for that reason that a good God leaves them so long upon the earth!" said Madame de Secherin, still turning her wheel. Then raising her eyes to her son by accident, she said—"Are you going into town, my son, this evening?"

"No, mother; why should you think I am going into town?"

"You have got your black coat, and white neckcloth, and are newly shaved."

"That is a fancy of my wife's, mother—she told me to go and make myself fine for Madame de Lancry. I had my blouse on, as I came from the manufactory."

"Now, Ursula, is this on my account? Ah! cousin, I shall be quite hurt if you alter your daily customs in the least on my account, while I am with you."

"Well. You see now little beauty," said M. Secherin, turning to Ursula, "I was right when I told you that it would be all the same to Madame de Lancry, whether I dined in my blouse, with a beard of yesterday, or not."

"Once more, dear cousin, I should be in despair, if I, by coming hither, had put you to the slightest inconvenience."

"Very well—it is agreed cousin. I accept your offer, and whatever my wife may say about it, I will remain hereafter in my blouse. You will excuse me, will you not? I assure you, when we are tired out with a hard day's work, it is very pleasant to be at one's ease."

"The truth is, that you weary yourself to death, just as if you had your fortune still to make my son," said Madame Secherin, with a sigh, "and yet God blessed the labours of your father."

"Be quiet, mother. When my property shall amount to a hundred thousand livres annual income, clear of the least encumbrance, I will stop the machinery. I have myself said, and my wife thinks, I am not yet quite rich enough; she would like to have a hundred thousand livres a year, to go and shine in Paris. Well! she shall have her hundred thousand livres a year. It is so pleasant, so sweet, to think that all the pains I take is giving pleasure to my wife; to think in a word, that it is in my power to realize all her wishes—and that, to do this, I have only got to work. Look you, cousin, this one idea only makes me as happy as a king, while I am working like a negro. This is the reason why I have such black hands. I have no time to play the dandy—no! not I," and M. Secherin burst into a loud laugh, and shewed his great coarse hands, which perfectly justified his jesting.

Ursula turned crimson between shame and spite, and darted a furious glance at her husband, who looked up at me timidly, and then down at his hands with a disconcerted air.

"And when that worthy hand," said I offering mine to M. Secherin, "is extended as the pledge of friendship, or of promise to be kept—the friendship which it plights, or the promise which it guarantees, are sacred, I well know it."

This action, and the simple words which my sympathy for this worthy man made me utter—this man, as loyal and devoted as he was unpolished—brought tears to his eyes: he raised the ends of my fingers to his lips almost with veneration.

His mother stopped short from her work, looked at me steadily, and said in a voice tremulous from emotion—

"Madam, will you permit me to embrace you—you do but justice to my poor son—you only!——" and casting a harsh glance at Ursula, who shrugged her shoulders at the speech, she made a movement to rise from her seat.

"Do not disturb yourself, madam," I said, and stooped down to her.

She kissed me twice on the forehead; and when I looked at her again, two big tears were rolling down her venerable cheeks. She wiped them away without saying a word, and again applied herself to the wheel.

"My poor mother! You will spoil her, if you talk to her of me, thus," said M. Secherin in a low voice, and evidently much affected.

All this passed very rapidly. I looked toward Ursula, and I was surprised at the ironical expression, with which she had witnessed this little scene. At this moment, the factory clock of M. Secherin struck eight.

"Mother, take my arm—let us go to supper—I am dreadfully hungry," said M. Secherin to his mother, moving toward her as he spoke.

"No! no! my son; give your arm to your cousin; my daughter-in-law will help me."

"Another derangement of domestic comfort, which I will not permit, madam," said I, taking Ursula's arm; are we not all one family?"

"Madame de Lancry is right, mother," said M. Secherin, going up to his mother, who, leaning heavily upon him, passed out before us.

"In good truth, Matilda," said Ursula, in an under tone, and with a half-vexed manner, "you have made a conquest of my mother-in-law, as you said you would. This is the first time I ever heard her desire her son to give his arm to any person but herself. Twenty ladies of our relations have been here, and no such thing has ever happened here before.

"So much the better; I am very proud of my conquest," said I, smiling, to Ursula, "for I think your mother-in-law a very delightful as well as a very worthy person."

"Delightful! My mother-in-law? You think her delightful. Ah! you are making fun both of her and us."

"I think her so delightful, that she appears to me to represent admirably one of those venerable ladies of the old provincial nobility, of whom Mademoiselle de Maran was always telling us, you know; who used to live on their own estates without ever coming to Paris or to Court."

Ursula looked at me with astonishment: she thought that I was in jest, while I was speaking the mere truth; for there is nothing so imposing as old age, when it is simple, thoughtful, venerable, and conscious of its own authority. We sat down to table, and scarcely had we done so, when M. Secherin said, "Mother, the keys to get some wine."

Ursula blushed anew with anger and confusion, as her stepmother slowly drew from her pocket an immense bunch of keys, and gave them to one of the country girls.

M. Secherin said grace, and we began supper. The table was excellent, almost delicate, indeed; everything was served without any attempt at style, but with admirable neatness.

"Cousin," said M. Secherin, "you are going to taste some of my mother's pastry," helping me, as he spoke, to some sweet things that were placed before him. "You will see how good it is. No one but my mother can make these tartlets. My only regret is, that *little beauty* will not learn to make them; but my little wife will not hear of it."

"She is very wrong," I replied quite seriously, "cousin, for she shows herself wanting in one of the talents of our family."

"Ah! bah! How, so, cousin?"

"Why, Ursula," said I, "do not you remember how Mademoiselle de Maran used always to tell us, 'that our great aunt de Surgy, and the Countess of Brionne—a princess of the House of Lorraine—I beg you will observe that, M. Secherin—had a rage for preparing curd cakes, flavoured with jasmine, and tartlets of orange jelly with burnt almonds; and that King Louis XV. thought himself very lucky, when those ladies would give him a share of their culinary labours.' So Mademoiselle de Maran used to say. Once more, do you not recollect it?"

"Yes, yes!" said Ursula, "but I had forgotten."

"Tartlets of orange jelly, with burnt almonds—that ought to be very good; I must try that," said Madame Secherin.

"Well, *little beauty*, does not this determine you? See now—since a princess of Lorraine made tartlets, you might do the same."

"Excuse me; I have no taste for that sort of amusement," replied Ursula, neither have I the honour of belonging to the house of Lorraine."

"But, my mother does not belong to the house of Lorraine, either; but that does not prevent her making cheese-cakes; therefore, you, too——"

"I took compassion, at this point, of Ursula's impatience, and interrupted her husband by asking him how he was satisfied with the results of his manufacture. He was delighted at the question, and entered into all sorts of details, which really interested me very much.

There is always a curious and instructive side to be found, if we choose to look for it, in practical men. Once conversing on ideas relative to facts, which he knew perfectly well, M. Secherin expressed himself with readiness, precision, and if not with eloquence, at least with energy and soul.

I remember to have asked him, whether he employed many children in his factory?

"I employ all that I can catch," he answered with a smile; "and once caught, I never let them go again. I make their parents sign a good and valid deed of surrender: and they must leave them with me, as long as possible."

"What advantage do you derive from the employment of children?"

"What advantage, cousin? that of preventing their parents, who are often harsh and selfish, from overworking the poor little wretches. In my factories, they only do as much as they are able, learn a good trade, become honest and industrious, always having good examples before their eyes—for I keep no bad characters in my employment. It is true that this costs me money, since the poor children do not bring me in as much as I expend on their account; but that is all one—for they are one of my extravagances—and when I see them happy, stout, and working gaily, upon my word! cousin, I think that I have made a capital investment."

"I admire your goodness of heart, my dear cousin, so much the more, that I have heard that many of your brother manufacturers—"

"Work their children to death—is it not so?" cried M. Secherin, with indignation; "wretches that they are! Stay, cousin, that puts me in mind of something that I never told my wife or my mother. For, indeed, it was hardly worth telling; and it might have made me pass for a braggadocio. But, since we are on the subject, I will tell you the whole. One day—it was before my marriage—I had gone to Paris to visit a manufactory. What did I see there?—children thin, sickly, doing more work than men—and for what salary? Heavens! for scarce enough to buy bread. Upon my honour, it disgusted me. I made no second thought about it, but spoke up to the master of the establishment, who was showing it to me. How can you have the heart, I said, to kill these poor little wretches thus, by a slow fire—for you *are* killing them, sir; I said. My fellow manufacturer told me, that I was meddling with that which *did* not concern me, and that he had no need for my observations. I told him that it did concern me; that I was a manufacturer too, and that the barbarous cupidity of him, and those like him, went far to disgrace an honourable business. He told me to go to the devil. I recommended him to do the like. I am naturally, cousin, as quiet as a lamb; but when people will stir up my temper, I cannot answer for myself. In short, I do not know how it fell out, but we came to hard words. I am a little too quick with my hands—my gentleman had seen service in the army—so the next day we fought. I had never touched a pistol in my life, but at game I am a good shot: to conclude, I lodged a bullet in the calf of his leg, for he turned his toes out like a dancing master."

"My son, you fought!" cried Madame Secherin, who had listened to this simple narrative, with all the signs of the deepest anxiety, clasping her hands with a sense, as it were, of fear.

"There! I was sure of it" said M. Secherin to me in a low voice; "mother is going to give me a dressing."

Then rising, and going to her, he said, in a tone of respectful tenderness: "Come, mother, I did very wrongly. It was a young man's folly—I never told you of it, thinking that it would make you uneasy."

"My child, my poor child!" said Madame Secherin, embracing her son affectionately; "how cruel pain have you given me!"

"But—Lord preserve me! mother—it is all over—only think—it is all over!"

"Your birth is also over, and I thank the Lord daily, that He has given me so good a son;" said Madame Secherin, with touching simplicity, wiping away a tear.

This scene, which proved to me that Ursula's husband was as brave, when occasion called for it, as he was energetical, devoted, and sincere—was interrupted by one of the two servant girls, who handed a letter to M. Secherin.

"Ah! wife," said he to Ursula, "it is from Chopinelle, I suppose he cannot come to pay his respects to-night."

"Ah! is it one of your neighbours?" said I to Ursula.

"He is our sub-prefect," she answered, with a blush.

I was so much surprised to see her blush, that I looked at her fixedly, not with the least idea of embarrasssing her, but as it were mechanically—when, to my great surprise, she turned crimson.

"It is exactly that," said M. Secherin; "he cannot come to-night; he has got circulars to write, for they talk of re-elections. He is a capital fellow, is Chopinelle, and a very handsome man too. Always well dressed, shaves every day, and wears gloves. Have you never met Chopinelle in society, cousin?"

"I think not," said I, smiling; "I do not know the name."

"Nevertheless, he goes into all the tip-top society of Paris, when he is there—does he not, wife? he dines with the ministry, and is quite the pet of the *faubourg noble*;* is it not so, *little beauty?*"

"I think M. Chopinelle boasts," said Ursula, drily.

"How funnily you say that—you who are always angry when he is contradicted, and who listen to him like an oracle!"

"I think M. Chopinelle is a liar!" said Madame Secherin, very shortly.

"Take care, mother, take care. You will have a famous quarrel with Ursula directly, if you speak ill of her *country*—for Chopinelle is a Parisian, like herself; and more than that, is her privileged waltzer, and her companion in her singing—for he has a perfect voice, Chopinelle, has he not, *little beauty?* a voice as sonorous as an organ pipe. You must sing together, for our cousin, that pretty duet, you know. You know very well, that duet you were practising so long; that duet from an Italian opera, that concludes in—I."

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* *Faubourg noble.* The West End! That part of Paris, where the nobility reside.

Ursula, desirous, unquestionably, of putting an end to a conversation which was becoming disagreeable to her, said to her mother-in-law, "My cousin is very much tired with her journey. She requires rest."

"Very right, daughter-in-law. Pardon me, madam," said Madame Secherin, turning to me. "My son, say grace!"

When grace had been said, we returned to the drawing-room. I wished my hosts good-night, and went up stairs with Ursula to my own chamber.

"To-morrow morning I will come and awake you; and we will have a chat together," she said to me, with a manner by no means free from embarrassment; "this evening you must be tired. Get some rest, if you can. Good night!"

CHAPTER XXI.

THE LOVE-LETTER.

The next morning, when I got up, I wrote a long letter to Gontran, entreating him to come to me at Rouvrai, as soon as possible. This letter, my husband would receive at Paris, on his return from London; so that it was possible that I might see him in eight days. Writing thus, for the first time, to Gontran, I experienced a delicious pleasure in this sweet occupation. I had so much to tell him. Every moment, I was on the point of telling him the whole; but I remembered the advice of M. de Mortagne, and submitted myself in silence.

My letter written, I waited with strange impatience for Ursula. All the recollections of my childhood and my youth had awakened, while the sorrows, which I had experienced, had ripened and developed, my judgment. I saw, with real grief, that Ursula overlooked the excellent and sterling qualities of her husband. All extravagant as the melancholy mood of Ursula had been, I yet preferred it to the decided, dry and almost contemptuous tone, which she appeared to me to have adopted toward her step-mother and M. Secherin.

But as I reflected more, I excused Ursula. She was alone, without advisers; and once embarked on a wrong course, she would naturally go more and more astray, daily, for want of friendly and salutary warning.

Several times I thought of the blushes and confusion of my cousin, when her husband had named M. Chopinelle. In the solitary position of Ursula, she had, perhaps, coquetted a little with this man; and I resolved to speak to her very frankly on the subject; and to entreat her not to expose herself to domestic disagreement, for a cause so worthless.

Madame Secherin appeared to me to be a woman of very strong sense; very firm, very obstinate. She had, I fancied, perhaps, even more influence over her son than Ursula had. And it seemed to me, also, that she entertained some secret sense of anger against her, which she was restraining till a good opportunity should occur for letting it break out.

Persons of this character, generally prudent, calm, obstinate, of clear-sighted intelligence, of simple hearts, of austere piety, know nothing either of management or moderation. Their religious impartiality makes them wait for proofs with invincible patience; but, when once convinced that they have right and justice on their side, they are pitiless, indeed.

Ursula came into my room, and, after a few phrases of no consequence, I said to her, "I must scold you, my sister. You are unreasonable. You promised me that you would strive to educate your husband, if I may so speak—to fashion him a little. With a few kind and gracious words, you could accomplish everything; for I am sure that I, who have no influence over him at all, in a few days could change him greatly for the better."

"You are accustomed to work miracles. Have you not bewitched my mother-in-law? My husband told me, this morning, that she doated on you."

"Confessing this triumph, which you see—do you think it so difficult to make ourselves beloved?"

"It is not so difficult, my dear Matilda, as it is troublesome. I do not feel the least desire to be loved by Madame Secherin."

"Listen to me, Ursula. Believe me, you are very much mistaken in the character of your mother-in-law."

"You have discovered in her the manners of a great lady. Are you now going to discover that she is a genius?"

"A genius? no; but she has much penetration: she is incessantly observing."

"What is there, that she can observe? I am not afraid of her."

"That I believe. Nevertheless, why not humour her?"

"For what purpose? I should like to see you in my place, my good Matilda."

"In your place? I should amuse myself very much."

"Here?"

"Here."

"But how, I pray you?"

"I will tell you: by making myself loved—by trying to work wonders—to change your husband, almost into a fine gentleman—to bring over your mother-in-law to anticipate, and even go beyond, your wishes, in all the improvements of this house, which you dislike so greatly."

"That is impossible. You do not know the obstinacy of Madame de Secherin, or the dislike of my husband for everything that is constrained or formal."

"Try always. Even yesterday, how did I manage to put myself on a good footing with her?"

"Oh! you are so fascinating; you know so well how to hide your disagreeable impressions. As for me, I do not know how to dissemble: I am too frank. For some months, I remained in the deepest melancholy, in a gloomy state of sadness. My despair has consumed itself in my tears. Now I have become hardened—I have endured so much. My heart is insensible to grief, even; I rally—I despise—I like that better."

From the beginning of our conversation, the tone of Ursula had been wiry, abrupt, and rough.

"My sister," said I; "you are not in your natural state of mind, you conceal from me some secret chagrin."

"None, I swear to you: I have taken my course. When we have enough fortune to go and live in Paris, I shall go. Until then I live mechanically; avoiding my girlish dreams, if at any time they rise up before me, in my own despite:—those happy memories! they remind me but too much of you, and of our dear childish days. Alas! Matilda, Matilda, you have spoiled my life."

After a long silence, Ursula burst into tears, as if quite suddenly she had given way to emotions hitherto suppressed.

"Oh, I was very sure," I exclaimed, "that my dearest friend was concealing something from me—that her short bitter words came from her lips, not from her heart."

"Well, then; yes, yes, forgive me. Yesterday, after the first joyful emotion which I felt at your arrival, an evil feeling took possession of me. I became ashamed of what was about me; I became ashamed of my continual melancholy, I feared to appear ridiculous to you, with my everlasting tears. I thought I would be resolute, careless, ironical—but this part so false, so dissembled, I could not support it. To you, in your presence even, it is impossible to speak falsely. Your poor Ursula feels this day as keenly, perhaps *more* keenly, than ever, the ill-assorted match which she has contracted. Yesterday—this morning, when I complained of the dullness of this house, I spoke falsely. What matters to me the frame that incloses my life, when the life itself is blighted. Ah! Matilda, with a heart which could have comprehended mine, the hardest, the most miserable life would have seemed happy."

"Poor Ursula: I love you better thus. I love your tears far better than your ironical tone and chilling smile. But, tell me; your husband seems to me to strive even to suppress your wishes. Although rich already, does he not labour without rest or relaxation, in order that he may one day satisfy your taste for opulence?"

"You would speak, would you not, Matilda, of this fortune, which I ordered him to acquire, in order that I may go and shine in Paris?" said Ursula with a bitter smile. "I seem to you very selfish, very avaricious, very vain, do I not?"

"You must be mad, Ursula; I never said so."

"No! no! it is true, Matilda—pardon me. But at the same time I should be grieved if you suspected me of being capable of an avarice so base and shameful. Listen to me, I say: on my arrival here, my husband talked to me of giving up his manufactures, of living at his leisure, of consecrating all his time to me. Shall I confess to you, Matilda, that I was alarmed—perhaps even more on his account than on my own—at this life of leisure which he proposed to share with me? Our tastes are so different!—there is so little sympathy between us! And then I know, too, how dear it would cost him to give up the occupations to which he was attached, the habits of activity which had become a second nature to him, which almost involved the question of his health. It would have been so impossible for me to recompense that sacrifice, that I would not accept it. Then, in order to render my refusal less painful to his self-esteem, in order to avoid saying—'this leisure, which you wish to consecrate to me, would be indifferent, or even wearisome'—then I was forced to feign I know not what of avarice, what of unbridled vanity. Then it was that I told him, that, instead of giving me pleasure by abandoning his business, he would, on the contrary, please me by persisting until he had acquired a sufficient fortune to enable us to shine in Paris; a fortune to shine, Matilda! Matilda, you know me—you know what value I set on luxury and splendour;—and even when my husband should have realized the fortune which he dreams of, alas! I feel too well that I shall not enjoy it. My life is consuming itself slowly, and wretchedly, my dear sister."

And with her last words Ursula let fall her head sorrowfully on her bosom—she seemed overwhelmed with a vast weight of affliction. The melancholy expression of her countenance, the languor of her downcast eyes was so well harmonized to her sad words, that, I confess to you, I believed blindly what she told me.

She even found a way to appear the victim of self-sacrifice to her husband, even while she was forcing him to toil without relaxation to augment a fortune which was large enough already.

I carried my blindness to such an extent that I even made myself uneasy about Ursula's presentiments, and set myself to work strenuously to combat them. "But, in a word," I said, "why dream on so dull a prospect? why give up all hope?"

Ursula took both my hands in hers, fixed her soft blue eyes, drowned in tears, upon my face, and murmured in a voice of the deepest emotion—

"You speak of hope, my sister—alas! I wrote you word the day after our fatal marriage, what was my hope—*it is a poor and humble resting place in the village cemetery—my prospect is eternity!*"

And Ursula leaned her head upon my shoulder, and wept bitterly. After a little while, however, she grew calm; yet had our conversation taken such a course that I did not see by what possible transition I could ask her, if she had not flirted a little with M. Chopinelle.

Knowing the enthusiastic character of my cousin, and the unoccupied state of her affections, I dreaded on her account the danger of solitude—I thought it would be profitable—nay, that it was necessary, to make her a partaker of my disquietude, and hesitated no longer.

"Tell me," said I, "Ursula, do you see much company?"

"A few relations of my husband, and a few merchants of Rouvrai, with whom he has business."

"But have you no habitual intimacy with any one?"

"Yes, with one or two friends of my mother-in-law, sometimes with the deputy King's advocate, and also with our sub-prefect."

"This Monsieur Chopinelle?"

"Exactly, who wrote a note last night, you know, to my husband."

Ursula pronounced these words so naturally, and with so little embarrassment, that I believed my suspicions all unfounded.

"And so you play and sing with him—is he a good musician?"

"Detestable!—he sings horribly out of tune. Unluckily, M. Secherin is much attached to him, and from politeness I am obliged to undergo—Heaven knows how many duets, and repetitions of duets. Ah! Matilda, do you remember what we used to say?" added Ursula, shaking her head mournfully—"'When it finds voice for two, music is a heavenly, a sacred language, which should never be profaned.' Judge, then, how I must suffer when I am obliged to sing with this man. I who, like you, used to believe, that it is only with a person tenderly beloved 'that we can share those bursts of soul, those passionate accents, which song only can convey!'"

I, indeed, well remembered, that in the height of our violent admiration for music we had oftentimes wondered how it could be possible to sing passionate duets in company with any one but a person whom we loved. So that these last words of Ursula set me completely at rest as regarded her coquetries; so that I was not afraid to say to her—

"You will think me very absurd; for here have I been imagining that your sub-prefect was making love to you."

Despite the tears, which were still quivering at the end of her long dark eye-lashes, Ursula fell into a fit of laughter so noisy and unaffected, that I was put quite out of countenance.

"M. Chopinelle!" she exclaimed, in the middle of her laughter, "what a ridiculous idea! You do not know what M. Chopinelle is like; but you will see him. Good Heavens! good heavens! the idea of M. Chopinelle making love to me!"

Laughter is certainly contagious; and, in spite of myself, I joined in my cousin's mirth; but after our merriment had subsided a little, Ursula said, very sorrowfully, with one of those sudden changes of sentiment which constituted her chief charm—

"Alas! Matilda, one of the causes of my despair is, that I feel my heart is dead, for ever dead. It has been so grievously worn out by sufferings concealed for so long a time, that if this poor heart beats at all, it is thy friendship, and that only, which lends it so much life as to flutter faintly. And then, my sister," she continued, with much real dignity of manner, "It is true that my husband wants many of those advantages which awaken passion —*that dream* of all us women; but he is kind, sincere, devoted; and trust me, Matilda, it would be impossible for me to wrong him, as it would be to fall in love with him."

"True, Ursula, true;" I replied, pressing her hand. "I recognize your heart in your words."

"Moreover," she continued, with a smile so pitiful that it brought tears into my eyes, "I am like those poor sick children, who derive a sort of sad consolation from being pitied; and should I dare to hope for pity, if I were guilty."

Doubtless I was completely prejudiced in Ursula's favour; but the most distrustful spirit must have been disarmed, as I was, by the appearances she knew so well to simulate of ingenuous sincerity. She had employed all arms, contemptuous wit, soft sensibility, delicacy, dignity, in order to convince me, and I was convinced.

At this moment, better informed, I have never been able to feel otherwise than confounded; struck, I was almost going to say, with a sort of admiration—for even splendid wickedness may excite a kind of wondering admiration—when I think with what wondrous skill that woman knew how to play on every string of the human soul—with what dexterity, with what pliancy she could pass from tears to smiles, from dignity to frankness, from pride to tenderness —all to convince you of a lie! Attacking, at all points, your intellect, your heart, your vices and your virtues, your sympathies and your aversions, she left not one chord of your mind, or your feelings, unsolicited.

About three o'clock, while M. Secherin was at his factory, and his mother taking her customary after-dinner nap, I was sitting with Ursula in the drawing-room, when M. Chopinelle was announced.

M. Chopinelle was a young man of a dark complexion, with a round ruddy face, fringed with black whiskers. His figure was stout and square, singularly graceless, with enormous hands and feet; his features were regular enough, although their expression was most ordinary; this had been sufficient to gain him in the province the name of being handsome.

In consideration of the season, probably, he wore a straw hat, and a neckcloth loosely knotted, shepherd-fashion, round his neck. A riding coat of coarse green camlet, with metal buttons, pantaloons with blue stripes, and shoes of gray doe-skin, completed his pastoral attire.

Scarcely had I caught a glimpse of this vulgar dress, before I was perfectly at my ease about the heart of Ursula. I will add, adapting to myself a small share of the style and manner of Mademoiselle de Maran, that M. Chopinelle, joined to this exterior, copied from that of *beau Leandre*, struttings of a triumphant self-satisfaction, softened down somewhat by a kind of official reserve and ministerial haughtiness, which made M. the sub-prefect, the very ideal of self-sufficient folly and vulgar incapacity.

I exchanged a satirical glance with my cousin, who received very coldly the noisy and familiar demonstrations of M. Chopinelle. He, on the contrary, seemed to me to have entered the room as a self-confident conqueror, as an intimate friend impatiently expected. But, for a moment, he was quite thrown back upon himself by the icy reception which he met with from Ursula; but after reflecting a little with himself, he probably came to the conclusion that his victorious ardour was a little out of place in the presence of a stranger. He smiled, then, with a peculiar air, which seemed to say to Ursula, "Be perfectly easy; I will not compromise you; I will entirely dissemble our mutual good intelligence." This parade of ridiculous and insolent stupidity disgusted me beyond measure; for at that time, I never dreamed that my cousin had given him cause for his conduct.

"What news is there in Rouvrai, M. Chopinelle?" said Ursula, continuing to work quietly at her embroidery.

"Nothing very important, madam; except as connected with the administration," he replied, with a self-important and mysterious air. "A dissolution is talked of: my correspondence, yesterday, prevented me keeping my engagement with our *great* Touraine-man*. But what would you have? We must be punctual in public business, before we think of doing the agreeable."

I looked at Ursula; she shrugged her shoulders; the words *great Touraine-man* could apply to no one but her husband; and I was much disgusted by the familiarity of this coarse witticism.

M. Chopinelle went on: "You may be sure, madam, that my regrets were not limited to that," with a gracious bow and smile to Ursula, "but state affairs must take the precedence of everything."

"My dear," said Ursula to me, making a slight movement of her head toward her visitor, "M. Chopinelle, sub-prefect of our district."

"Has madam just arrived here *from the Capital?*"

"Yes, sir."

"Madam will find the province dreadfully dull, wearisome, and stupid. To us Parisians, it is a perfect Siberia—a place of exile—as bad almost as being sent at once to the antipodes. You cannot form the least idea, madam, of the sort of people we have in my district. Upon my word, one would fancy himself among the Hurons, to say the least. Fortunately, Madame Secherin has been cast away also on this foreign land, and if madam should remain here some time, we will get up a little Parisian colony in the midst of these savages of Touraine. I presume you are a musician, madam," added M. Chopinelle.

Luckily, he took upon himself to answer his own question, saying, "It is impossible to doubt it. You have, unquestionably a charming voice. We will transport hither the country of the fine arts. Madame Secherin has a great deal of talent for music—Madame Secherin the younger, be it understood; for her mother-in-law can only sing masses—ha! ha! ha!" and he looked at me, quite proud of his impertinence.

He perceived that he was not particularly to my taste; so he turned for applause to Ursula, who answered him, very drily, "Monsieur, I think what you have said about my husband's mother, is entirely out of place."

The astonishment of Chopinelle was extreme. "So! so!" said he, with a sort of spiteful manner; "you must have something against me, that you receive me thus. One would say that I was a stranger to you."

"Really, monsieur," said Ursula, with imperturbable coolness, "I do not know what you are talking about! Let us speak, if you please, of the post-road in the neighbourhood, which you are promising us incessantly."

M. Chopinelle appeared to me to be touched to the quick. Wishing, unquestionably, to justify the language which he had used to my cousin, he forgot himself even so far as to say, "I do not know whether it is the presence of this lady that intimidates you so much, but you must confess that, in general, you do not treat me so ceremoniously. I suppose I am not the friend of the family, then, madam? Well! well! I will complain to our dear Secherin, I promise you!"

If I had not been misled by the blindest and most foolish confidence in Ursula, the ill-temper of this man, always exceedingly ill-bred, must have given rise to infinite suspicions; yet I saw nothing in M. Chopinelle but a ridiculous ass, who wished to profit in my eyes, by that sort of intimacy which the habits of a country life justify, in order to gain the credit of possessing Ursula's interest or affections.

It is to give an idea of the extreme folly and stupidity of this person, that I have quoted a few words of his conversation, which was nothing but a pompous mixture of common-place absurdities, with intolerable pretensions.

It has always been inexplicable to me, how people can be amused by the folly of fools; their vulgarity, their drivellings, disgust me—make me melancholy in scarcely a less degree than the sight of physical infirmities.

The coldness and dislike, which I could not refrain from manifesting to M. Chopinelle, shortened the duration of his visit. After he was gone, Ursula asked me, laughing violently, whether I now thought she was smitten with the sub-prefect—whether it was possible to meet a man more entirely absurd—and if I was not ashamed of my suspicions on that score?

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* *Gros Tourangeau* implies more even than this—great coarse countryman, or the like term of cockney ridicule.

I shared the merriment of Ursula, and certainly did not retain the least doubt of her sincerity.

M. Chopinelle did not return for several days, to the great surprise of M. Secherin, who continued to overwhelm his wife with inquiries concerning him, which seemed to annoy him not a little.

Completely reassured on the subject of Ursula's coquetries, in the course of a few days I made another discovery, which gave me yet greater pleasure. In my presence, the tone of Ursula to her husband was cold, indifferent, sometimes almost scornful. M. Secherin did not, however, seem to notice this, but appeared to be the happiest man in the world; and sometimes, greatly to Ursula's annoyance, he would mention things which showed them to be on the best possible terms, and that his wife loaded him with proofs of affection.

Several times he said to my cousin, laughing and shrugging his shoulders: "It is because our cousin is here, that you will not seem to be in love with me."

In fact, after having for a long time asked myself, why it could be that my cousin dissembled her conduct, when it was conformable to the advice which I had given her, I was convinced at last, that she did so in order to preserve to herself the right of representing that she was the most unfortunate, the most misunderstood, of womankind; and in order to be able to complain to me of the sort of moral misalliance to which she had been sacrificed.

This conviction tranquillized my mind greatly, with regard to the future lot of Ursula.

For the first time, I discovered a sort of melancholy monomania in the exaggerated sadness which she had affected during our first conversation at Rouvrai. I did not, indeed, accuse my cousin of falsehood, but I looked upon her as almost unhappy in being ashamed of her happiness; and in not daring to confess that, on recognizing the noble and generous qualities of her husband, she had determined wisely not to perceive some of his small vulgarities. Once satisfied that her griefs were but affected, a sort of coquetry with sorrow, I had not the courage to cross Ursula by commenting upon it. I believed her, I saw her, to be perfectly happy, and to all the rest I was indifferent.

I was far, indeed, from regretting the tears which I had given to her imaginary sorrows; but I could not restrain a smile when I thought that the summit of Ursula's felicity, was to be thought the most wretched of beings. The more I observed her, the more I perceived how great was the extent of her influence over her husband. Sometimes I even doubted, whether it was equalled by that of Madame Secherin.

She still persisted in a forced coldness toward Ursula, which seemed at times to wound her son's feelings.

About eight or ten days after the scene which I have described, M. Chopinelle came to Rouvrai, to dinner, and this time made excuse again of his numerous occupations, to account for his absence.

M. Secherin received him with evident and joyous cordiality. After supper when night came, instead of playing, as usual, at picquet, with her son, Madame Secherin seated herself at her spinning-wheel.

My cousin went out to give some orders in his manufactory. The windows were open, for it was a delicious evening. Ursula and M. Chopinelle were sitting on a sofa, behind the chair of Madame Secherin (who seemed to be completely absorbed with her spinning) chatting together.

Thanks to the faint light of the lamp, the drawing-room was in a sort of misty twilight. I went and seated myself near one of the windows, to look out upon the night, which was pure and starry, and fell, I believe, into a sort of revery. I do not know how long I had been buried in my thoughts, when, turning my head mechanically, I saw M. Chopinelle give Ursula a letter, which she thrust hastily into the pocket of her apron.

I was almost entirely hidden in the recess of the window; and my cousin thought, doubtless, that as she could not see me, I could not perceive her motions. I almost imagined that I was dreaming.

At this moment Madame Secherin, stopping the measured motion of her wheel, said in the most natural voice to Ursula, half-turning her head as she spoke: "Daughter-in-law, pray come and hold this skein, for me to wind."

Ursula now rose and approached her mother-in-law. I can see that scene, as if it were yet before me,

Ursula wore a dress of white muslin with pink stripes, and an apron of bright blue silk, trimmed with black lace. Standing upright before Madame Secherin, she held the skein of white thread upon her two hands, and as if annoyed by the little task her mother-in-law had imposed upon her, was tapping the floor lightly with her pretty foot.

Suddenly with a movement quick as thought, Madame Secherin plunged her hand into the pocket of Ursula's apron, and seized the letter of M. Chopinelle.

"With traitors it is fair to use treachery"—she cried in a threatening voice—"I saw the whole in that mirror."

And she pointed to a mirror placed opposite to her, which must naturally have reflected whatever passed behind her chair.

"Madame!" said Ursula, growing pale.

"I have been watching you this long time," said Madame Secherin—"my son shall know the whole."

CHAPTER XXII.

NIGHT BRINGS COUNSEL.*

This scene passed so quickly, that I had barely time to approach Madam Secherin and say to her—

"For God's sake! madam, speak low, you will be overheard; your son may return at any moment."

"I wish he would come quickly," answered that inflexible and determined woman.

M. Chopinelle was crest-fallen, stupefied. Standing upright by Ursula, he could not utter a syllable.

"Madam," cried I, "my cousin may have been imprudent, but not criminal."

"My poor son!" said Madame de Secherin, not answering me, but gazing at the letter which she had captured—"and for this woman he is killing himself with labour—and for this woman he sometimes forgets his mother. But God is no less just than he is good—no! no! he is good, and will not suffer the guilty to escape unpunished."

She rang the bell as she spoke, and a servant answered it.

"Go, tell my son to come and speak with me instantly; he must be in the factory," she said, and the servant girl obeyed her. I gazed at Ursula in speechless wonder, so much did her imperturbable coolness confound me.

"You are about at length to be treated as you deserve," said Madame Secherin, indignantly, to Ursula, shewing her the letter as she spoke—"my son shall know the whole."

Ursula had recovered all her self-composure, and answered her mother-in-law with an air of the most frank and natural astonishment that can be imagined.

"In truth, madam, I do not understand your reproaches. I do not know to what you allude when you tell me that I shall be treated as I deserve. It seems to me that before accusing me, you had better open that letter—if it is the letter which causes your anger—and assure yourself of its contents."

Madame Secherin raised her head quickly, and looked at my cousin in violent surprise.

"What! do you dare to say?—" she exclaimed.

"Heavens! madam, nothing can be more simple; my husband's birth-day is very near at hand. I gave monsieur," pointing to M. Chopinelle, "a commission to execute for me relative to a surprise which I am preparing for M. Secherin. Foreseeing that it might be impossible for M. Chopinelle to speak with me about it in private, and wishing to keep it entirely a secret, I begged him to write me a line on the subject; this is the great secret—and all that there is in it, madam."

Relieved from a tremendous weight of anxiety, I cast myself upon Ursula's neck; she had spoken so simply, so naturally, so frankly, that I reproached myself bitterly with having suspected her.

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* A phrase signifying that it is wise to consider before acting or speaking.

I said to Madame Secherin—"You see, madam, you were mistaken."

Madame Secherin sat astonished. She looked wildly at the letter which she held in her hands, and seemed unable to believe what she heard.

"How," she said, speaking to herself, "is it possible that I should have been mistaken to such a degree? So long, too, as I have been watching them? No! no!" she cried, quickly breaking the seal of the letter, "the heart of a mother never is so deceived. Besides, why should I feel such aversion for this woman? I am not unjust, not a hater; no—no! she must be guilty, she *is* guilty!"

And with the words, she drew near the lamp to read the letter, and began looking for spectacles. The face of my cousin remained perfectly unchanged; and she said, with a smile, to M. Chopinelle—

"Well, monsieur, here is an end of our surprise!"

But the sub-prefect stared at her with a scared and stupid expression; then suddenly snatched up his hat, and was making in a hurry for the door, when he was met by M. Secherin, who caught him by the arm, and cried out, laughing, as he held him back—

"Why, you are not going yet, Chopinelle! are you mad? and my revenge at écarté, which you were to give me? Come, come! you do not get off thus."

"At last, here is my son," cried Madame Secherin, who held the letter still open, but without having read a word of it; "all will be now explained."

M. Secherin had brought M. Chopinelle back with him, and still held him by the arm.

"Will be explained!" he repeated, "what is it? what will be explained, mother?"

"Oh! husband dear, a terrible adventure," Ursula made haste to answer, gayly. "Only picture to yourself, that M. Chopinelle just now gave me a letter secretly. Good Heavens! yes—very mysteriously, too—just for all the world! as if it had been a real declaration of love. Now, should you like to know what this letter is? Alas! I suppose I must make up my mind to let you know. It contains some information about a little surprise I was preparing for your birth-day, with which I had intrusted M. Chopinelle. As it was very likely that I should not get an opportunity of speaking alone to monsieur, I requested him to write me, what he would be unable to tell me, so that no one might suspect anything about it. Now, unluckily, the whole has come out, and I shall have no fun with my surprise."

"So, so: that's all right—the day after to-morrow is St. Benedict's day, doubtless," said M. Secherin. "Ah! my wife, you were spoiling me! and so you took this good fellow, Chopinelle, for your accomplice, did you? Ha, ha! Mr. sub-prefect, so you league yourself with my wife, do you?" he exclaimed, laughing heartily—"So, you two are plotting together to procure me a surprise, are you?"

"A surprise!" said Madame Secherin, casting a penetrating glance at Ursula, "we shall soon see." And she began to unfold the letter.

M. Chopinelle became as pale as ashes; and I, struck by a frightful presentiment of evil, shuddered with dread—for something told me that, by a degree of presence of mind which confounded me, and by her audacious falsehood, Ursula had retarded the awful discovery.

Seeing the consternation of the sub-prefect, I was convinced that it was undoubtedly a love-letter, and determined to attempt, for the last time, to save Ursula. I exclaimed, therefore, trying to hide the alteration of my voice, of which I was but too conscious—

"You know, cousin Secherin, this sort of surprise must be considered sacred—it ought to be respected."

"I think so too—so, pray, mother, do not read this letter, but give it back to Ursula, that she and her accomplice may carry out their little villanies. I will pretend to know nothing about them."

"Give me—give me the letter, madam," exclaimed M. Chopinelle, putting his hand forward to receive it. That hand trembled like a leaf; I thought that everything was over.

But at this moment, Ursula, who had scarce turned away her eyes from her mother-in-law, and had constantly been drawing nearer to her, by degrees, with a sullen air, burst into a fit of loud laughter, and snatched the letter, crying out, "My good mother, there shall be no partiality; neither you, nor any one of them, shall know my surprise before the time."

"Bravo! bravo! escape now, my little wife; escape now!" cried M.

Secherin, and Ursula hurried out of the room; I followed her almost mechanically, and M. Chopinelle did likewise.

Once safely out of the drawing-room, he wiped his brow, as if relieved from great anxiety, and said, with a bewildered air,

"What coolness! She has saved us! What a woman! Heavens! what a woman!"

The moment we were alone, my cousin tore the letter into shreds, and thrust the pieces into the pocket of her apron.

"Ah! Ursula," I said in a reproachful tone, "I tremble yet. How terrible a lesson! God grant that it may not be lost!"

"You may indeed boast yourself on your presence of mind. Had it not been for you, all was discovered. I have not a drop of blood in my veins," cried M. Chopinelle, with a confused and frightened manner. "Ah! Ursula! what a woman you are!"

If I had yet had the least doubt, these last words of M. Chopinelle, connected with his strange agitation, must have dispelled it. My cousin looked at us both with an affected air of surprise, and said, laughing,

"And is it possible, my good Matilda, that you are speaking seriously? If so, what *do you mean with your terrible lessons*? What connection can such *terrible* words have with a discovery so innocent as this, which was on the point of being made? Would not any one suppose that you were talking of something serious? Are you, too, going to imagine, with my wise mother-in-law, that it was really a love epistle?"

This impudent mockery of assurance frightened me; and, for the moment, struck me dumb. The sub-prefect, no less thunderstruck than I, looked at me stupidly, and said, like one bewildered,

"Wonderful! wonderful! It is scarce possible to believe that one hears her rightly. Heavens! what a woman!"

Ursula's laughter still increased, as she exclaimed, "And you, too, M. Chopinelle! You are disturbed; you grow pale and shake. You are in ecstacies at my presence of mind, which you say has hindered everything from being discovered. In truth I am in despair, that the poor commission with which I troubled you, should have produced such terrible emotions. But do you know that you are exceeding awkward—that your bewildered, frighttened air, is in itself, enough to have justified my mother-in-laws's suspicions! For an embryo statesman, I must say, you have very little self-possession; and that, too, for such nonsense as this was. What would have happened, I should like to know, if it had related to anything serious? I have great fears that you will never succeed in politics, my poor Monsieur Chopinelle."

"How!" I exclaimed, in spite of myself enraged at her effrontery, "suppose your husband had opened that letter?"

"He would have known what present I am going to give him on his birthday—our surprise would have failed—that is all."

And Ursula looked at me steadily and without the symptom of a blush—her features were as composed, and her expression as sweet and smiling, as if she had spoken nothing but the truth.

We were still standing in the vestibule, when M. Secherin rejoined us, smiling and gay as was his wont.

Ursula exclaimed, the moment she beheld him: "Your mother is very angry at my childish nonsense, is she not? After all, what I did was very wrong; for now, that I think of it, I must certainly have seemed afraid of your reading that letter. Tell me, did not your mother see it in that light? I am sure that she did, and she is right too, for appearances seem to be against me!"

"Ha! ha! ha!" said M. Secherin, laughing very loudly. "You must be mad, with your appearances. Quite the contrary, I assure you. To my great surprise, my mother, instead of being angry at your taking the letter out of her hands, only looked at me steadily, when you had gone out, without saying one word. Then she asked me to give her my arm, and went up to her own chamber. I could not get a single word out of her."

Ursula shook her head sorrowfully as she made answer: "I was sure of it, my dear husband, I was sure of it. Here is your mother really angry with me. I do not know what I would not do, that this should not have happened—that I should have behaved so headstrongly! I never shall forgive myself for it."

And a tear sparkled in her eyes as she spoke.

"Come, come!" said her husband, moved by her seeming grief, "now you are going to upset yourself—to grieve yourself for mere nonsense—when I tell you too, that she did not say a word—there now—be quiet—do!"

"Precisely the reason why I am grieved. I am hurt seriously by this—her silence seems to accuse me. She is fancying some neglect on my part."

M. Chopinelle made his escape, while her husband was consoling Ursula. I pretended that I had a headache, and made it an excuse for retiring. Ursula and her husband accompanied me to my chamber door, and wished me good night. I was left alone!

Ursula then was guilty—I could not entertain one doubt of it. My heart was like to burst. I know not that I have ever felt before, or since, the agony which I then experienced. Ursula had been false then—ay! false from the beginning.

Her everlasting melancholy—her meditative sadness—her longings for ideal bliss—her scruples, which took the alarm at whatever was not exquisitely delicate—all this was but a mockery—a falsehood!

And I had been bewailing myself over her imaginary sufferings, and all the while she was suffering nought. She had sinned—and that, too, without the excuse of passion—without the excuse of that fascination which a man eminently gifted, might have exerted on her senses.

She had betrayed her duty for a man of whom she was ashamed—for she ridiculed him—contradicted him with imperturbable assurance.

During this scene, which might have been her utter ruin, her brow had remained unmoved, intrepid—she had charmed the storm into silence when on the eve of bursting; and that, with a presence of mind, with a coolness, an audacity that made me shudder.

These discoveries gave me pain beyond all that I can describe. Alas! to my shame I confess it, perhaps the bitterness with which I saw my illusions vanish, was rendered keener by the rage which I experienced at finding myself the dupe of my own good-nature.

And yet—no! no! the more I call to mind what I then felt, the more it seems to me that I was overwhelmed by this one thought—that I had no more a sister!—that she, in whom I put such trust, was no more worthy to be called my friend.

I passed a sad and agitated night. When I awoke the next morning, my maid told me that M. Secherin had already been several times to my door, to know if I could admit him.

A good deal disturbed by this, I dressed myself as quickly as I could, and sent for my cousin. He was not long in coming, but he looked care-worn and sorrowful.

"What do you wish to say to me," I began, "my dear cousin?"

"Something extremely grave, cousin," he answered, "and as you are one of the family, and my wife's best friend, we are not to have any secrets from you. Guess what has happened? It is as if the roof had fallen down upon me. I never should have dreamed of such a thing—but when old people take a fancy into their heads——"

"I do not understand what you mean, cousin!"

"Would you ever have believed that my mother could have been very cruel and unjust to my poor wife? Well! she has been so, nevertheless," said he. "Last night, Ursula told me the whole, weeping at her own words. My heart is almost broken. Would you believe, that, when I am not present, my mother treats her with the grossest injustice?—that she checks her sharply—that she scolds her—while Ursula, like a sweet lamb as she is, bears everything without complaining. Last night's scene, however, has brought the matter to a crisis?"

"Last night's scene?"

"Certainly—Ursula has told me everything. My mother's ridiculous suspicions about Chopinelle and the letter, wounded my wife's feelings more deeply than all else—and with good cause too. For, in a word, as my wife said to me last night, 'You can easily understand, my poor wolf, that so long as it related only to things of small consequence, I could afford to hold my peace—but now, when it concerns a suspicion involving both your honour and my own, I can no longer condemn myself to silence before you. To do so, would be almost to admit that your mother accuses me with injustice!' Now see just what it is," cried M. Secherin, "mother-in-law and daughter-in-law are just like fire and water. It is the devil to pay!—I ought to have expected as much; and yet, not quite so either—for my poor wife never said a word for herself; she gave up in everything to my mother. She is good—is admirably good;" and he began to walk to and fro the room in fearful agitation.

I saw at once, that, fearing to be anticipated by her mother-in-law, Ursula had made a pretended confession to her husband, and profited by her influence over him, to make herself out completely innocent. Greatly indignant as I was at Ursula's conduct, and grieved at the blindness of her husband, I yet would not say a word that could, by any means, awaken his suspicions, although I endeavoured to calm his irritation against his mother.

"All this will readily accommodate itself," I said. "My dear cousin, the heart of a mother is always somewhat suspicious—somewhat jealous. This is the natural fault of true affection."

"Therefore, I will have none of it. I shall but have to speak very plainly to her. You pretend to say, mother, that Chopinelle has been making love to my wife, these last three months. Well—it is just three months, to a day, that my wife has been more affectionate to me than she ever was before. And this is quite true, cousin, too. You can have no idea how Ursula has petted me, and spoiled me, these last three months. It is '*My big wolf*' here! and '*My good dog*' there! for Ursula does just as your aunt wished me to do: it is but justice to her, to say so. She keeps all these pretty names for me when we are alone. In short, I can only tell you, that never—never have I been so happy as within the last three months; so gay—so quietly and peacefully contented. This is not a dream—this is not a suspicion; I feel it—I experience it; it is reality—truth! So that, whether my mother says all this, or absolutely nothing, it is all one to me. Ha! ha! ha!" he continued, laughing with blunt sincerity, "my wife in love with Chopinelle! How can any one conceive so ridiculous an idea? In truth, it is madness; and, as Ursula told me to-night, if it had not been for affronting Chopinelle, and setting him against the great road in the neighbourhood, which will be so useful to my manufactory, she would have packed him off long since, with his duets. He bored her to death; he literally flayed her ears; for, instead of singing, it seems that he bellows, like the devil with a bad cold in his head—as Ursula says. It always had a good deal that effect on me; but, as I don't know anything about it, I kept it to myself; and so did Ursula, for fear of annoying me by ridiculing my most particular friend. I should just like to ask you, where you suppose my mother found the knack of imagining such things? A great fellow so absurd—such an ass as that! In truth, he must be very ridiculous, this Chopinelle; for, in spite of her tears, my poor Ursula made so much fun of him, that we ended by laughing like two children. She is so droll—so merry, my little wife, when she likes it. You can have no idea of it, cousin; for, when she is before you, she behaves herself, for fear that you should think her in bad taste; but, between ourselves, there is not such a merry little madcap anywhere. It is for that, I am so much annoyed to see her sorrowful. He must have a heart of stone, who could bear to annoy her; and my mother, who is generally so kind, must needs go and take a spite to her. She—she——"

"I dare to say, cousin, that Ursula has nothing with which to reproach herself; but you know, old age always is suspicious; and, moreover, it seems to me, that your mother has hitherto made no complaint against your wife."

"Certainly, she has not; but wait a little. It is about to happen, now. I understand, now, the secret of my mother's manner last night. She never does anything by halves. That silence is but the presage of a terrible scene. I know my mother: she says nothing, unless she has something to say; and then she is terrible indeed."

"The most united families are never free, cousin, from these discussions; you know it very well; but these slight storms pass, and are soon forgotten."

"Doubtless; but after this, as Ursula was saying, in order to avoid such storms for the future, perhaps it would be better for my mother—better for us, too—to live a little way apart. About two gun-shots hence, there is a very pretty little house to be sold; I could establish myself very well there, with my wife—leaving this to my mother. In a word, she would be more comfortable; for, as Ursula says, it is on my mother's account, that we should do this."

"Leave your mother, cousin? Consider what you are about—after so long a time that she has been accustomed to live with you!"

"Oh! it would not really be leaving her—we should see her every day, and oftener two or three times, than once. And then, you see, Ursula has a very delicate chest, notwithstanding that her health seems so good; and my mother's hours for meals are so different from those to which my wife has been accustomed, that she has the greatest difficulty in the world to adapt herself to them. In the long run, she would fall ill from it. She has struggled against it as long as she could, without saying a word to me about it—poor little thing; but now, at last, she confessed to me that she could not bear it."

"So, in short, cousin, you are determined, or almost determined, to separate yourself from your mother. It is a very serious resolution; and, I must say, I think she has been dealt with rather suddenly: yesterday, you had not thought of such a thing."

"No! surely—that is to say, sometimes my wife has talked to me about it, at intervals; but, last night, she made me understand that it would be the wisest plan for both parties. And now, I am quite of her opinion—now, that I am sure my mother is unjust to my wife;—sooner or later, that would have given rise to coldness between us. Do you not think we shall do wisely to act thus, cousin? 'But—oh! first of all'—Ursula said to me, 'above all, consult Matilda, and let us follow her advice.'"

"Since you ask my advice, I would prevail upon you to be patient somewhat longer. Your poor mother has not the least expectation of this sudden separation. It will come upon her like a terrible and sudden blow."

"Do you really think so, cousin?"

"Indeed, I do; and shall you feel nothing?"

"Certainly: I should be sadly grieved, if it were the question of leaving my mother for ever. I do not even know, that I could consent to it at all; but it is only now a question of living two gun-shots off, no farther."

"Nevertheless, believe me, this resolution will be very painful to her. Do not be in a hurry—believe me—wait and reflect."

At this moment one of Madame Secherin's servant girls entered the room, and said,

"Monsieur, Madame Secherin begs you to come to her. She also requests madam to accompany you. She is waiting in *the room with three windows.*"

"In the room of my late father!" said my cousin, looking at me with a strange mixture of surprise and fear; "this is very extraordinary! Since the death of my father she has never used that room except to pray in—to her it is a sort of chapel. Cousin, you cannot conceive the sadness—the fear with which it strikes me. I know my mother—something both terrible and strange is about to happen."

Exceedingly astonished myself at being thus summoned by Madame Secherin, I followed my cousin with a dark presentiment of evil. I have retained a vivid recollection of the family scene that followed; for it has often seemed to me that similar scenes must have many times occurred, inasmuch as the feelings that were then brought into play, were, and will ever be, deeply and generally *human!* The conversation, which I had just had with M. Secherin, proved to me evidently what I had half-guessed already, that Ursula, instead of dreading the vulgarity of her husband, affected to partake of it, in order to increase her influence over him.

The cunning wit, the shrewdness of my cousin, really frightened me.

I was desirous now of quitting Rouvrai hastily—I repented even of coming thither—a secret foreboding told me that this journey would be fatal to my happiness.

When I began to reflect upon the days of my childhood, and upon the humiliations which Mademoiselle de Maran had inflicted upon Ursula on my account, I began to persuade myself that, despite her continual protestations of affection, Ursula must needs be too false, too treacherous, and too self-interested, not to feel likewise deeply envious.

I had an indefinite feeling, that she could not have forgiven me the apparent advantages I possessed over her; and that, sooner or later, she would avenge herself upon me. The coolness and audacity which I had seen her display on the previous evening, began now to alarm me on my own behalf.

A woman so young, so beautiful, so daring, so cunning, so perverted—seemed to me the most dangerous being in the world. Blushing at nothing—daring everything—lying with imperturbable effrontery, possessing the strange gift of tears at will, united to the most fascinating smiles—delightful—full of talent, yet *devoid of soul*—what might not she undertake?—what could resist her?—in what might she not succeed?

While I was following M. Secherin, I could think only of the exquisite skill with which Ursula had armed her husband against the accusations which his mother was undoubtedly about to make to him; and, engaged still in this thought, I entered the room with my cousin, in which his mother waited for us.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE WIFE AND THE MOTHER-IN-LAW.

There was something both mournful and imposing in the appearance of that room which had belonged to the late M. Secherin. His widow, in consequence of a half-superstitious feeling of affection, had left the apartment in precisely the same state in which it had been at the death of her husband. Here and there, upon the different articles of furniture, stood phials filled with various kinds of medicine; while, on a writing-desk, was a half-finished letter, without doubt the last to which M. Secherin had set his hand, covered with a glass shade.

This room, which had been so long closed, was damp—cold as a funeral vault, and gloomy, for it was hung round with dark draperies; and the dim light, which scarcely entered through the half-closed blinds, if possible, augmented the death-like sadness of this melancholy chamber; wherein everything appeared to call up to the mind the most painful images of desolation and death-agonies.

In spite of myself, I shuddered; my cousin turned very pale, and approached his mother with a sort of religious dread.

Madame Secherin was dressed, as usual, in black; but she had substituted a widow's cap for the peasant's mob, which she usually wore. Her white hair escaped all dishevelled, from under this head-dress; her gray eyebrows were bent in a deep scowl, her lips painfully contracted; and her whole countenance, wearing an expression of sadness, of suffering, and of severity, altogether produced an effect on my mind, that long afterward remained imprinted on it deeply.

Suddenly, as we entered, without uttering a word, Madame Secherin extended her arms to her son. He cast himself into them weeping convulsively, and for some moments held his mother closely clasped to his bosom.

At last, she said in a voice choked with emotion, "My son, my poor son, courage!"

M. Secherin wiped the tears from his eyes as he answered with many signs of emotion.

"Heavens! mother, why have you sent for us hither into my father's chamber? It recals to your mind, and to mine also, moments of cruel suffering: it is not wise in you to do so."

"My son, this place to me is sacred; you know it. I oftentimes come hither to pray. It is like a holy spot to me. It seems that your sainted father can hear and see me better when I am here."

Then addressing herself to me—"Madam," she said, "you are an angel of virtue and of kindness. It is, therefore, that I have taken the liberty of calling for you. You entertain feelings of friendship for my son; you know that he is upright and good; you will not abandon us? You will be for justice, will you not?" And as she spoke, Madame Secherin stretched out her trembling arms toward me.

"Madam," I said, "I know not wherefore———"

"I am about to tell you all; and although this wretched woman calls you her sister, you will be just, I am convinced. You can have nothing in common with the guilty."

M. Secherin looked at me, and made me a sign of intelligence, as if understanding what his mother was about to say. She took her son's hand into both of her own, looked at me with an expression of deep astonishment, and said to him in a voice that betrayed deep agitation—

"My son, if a great peril should befall you, you would come to me, would you not? You would console yourself in my company. I should be to you, as all that you had lost. You would never be altogether wretched, while you had me, toward whom to look, should you?"

"But, mother, wherefore do you say this to me?"

"Listen—listen! I tell you this, to prove to you, that the Lord never abandons those who are true and right of heart. Do you hear me? If base, bad hearts deceive and abuse them—to recompense their sufferings, they find another heart, true and devoted as their own. A mother's heart, for instance! And, by the aid of that blessing, they forget the guilty who have wronged them. Courage! my poor son, courage!"

Unquestionably, Madame Secherin perceived, and wished to prepare he son, for the cruel blow she was about to strike at his peace, in disclosing to him the treachery of Ursula.

M. Secherin appeared to me to be growing weary of these preliminaries, and impatient.

Here, his mother, unable to control her indignation any longer, cried,

"You must leave *her*. You must abandon her without seeing her any more! Do you understand me? That is what *she* deserves—but I shall still remain to you."

"But explain yourself, mother!"

"Well! my son!"

"Well! explain!"

"My son! your wife deceives you!" said Madame Secherin, looking at him with a terrified expression, although she spoke tenderly.

She expected a violent outbreak of passion; but, what did she think, when she saw her son shrug his shoulders, and reply quietly,

"Let us say no more about that, mother. I know what you mean. You would speak of Chopinelle? Well; between ourselves, that is totally absurd!"

It is impossible to paint the astonishment of Madame Secherin, as she heard her son thus receive her explanation, which she believed to be overwhelming. Her natural instinct, however, enlightened her instantly, and she exclaimed, "She has anticipated me! She has anticipated me!" and she hid her head in her hands.

"Yes!" her son quietly replied; "yes, certainly, she has. My wife told me last night, that you seemed to believe that the letter which Chopinelle had given her, was a love-letter. She anticipated you, so far as to tell me, that you believed that this man loved her; and that she loved him in return. Well! what then, mother! You have been mistaken. You have not seen clearly. Let us say no more about it! Now embrace me! Only let me say this—if I had been less confident in Ursula's love than I am, this might have caused me a good deal of grief; and even made me suspect my poor little wife."

My cousin appeared so entirely satisfied, so blindly persuaded of his wife's truth, that his mother, wishing to strike a decisive blow, foreseeing that all attempts to humour him would be vain, raised herself to her full height, calm, and majestic; lifted her hands toward Heaven, and cried with a voice like that of one inspired, seeming to come from her very heart:

"By the sacred memory of your father! as truly as God sits in heaven—may I perish otherwise, as a perjured thing, eternally—your wife is faithless to you!"

The accusation was terrific! this violent oath had such weight, in the mouth of an austere and pious woman, such as Madame Secherin, that her son, despite his deep trust in Ursula, grew pale as a sheet.

Immovable, with his eyes fixed and glaring, he stared at his mother with an indescribable expression. I was, in truth, astonished at the character of grief, rage, and despair, which for a moment lent a stamp of almost savage energy to the features of M. Secherin, ordinarily so kind and jovial.

"The proofs—the proofs of this, mother!" he exclaimed.

"Proofs! do you ask me for proofs! when I have sworn to you—sworn by the holy memory of your father?" cried Madame Secherin, in a tone of deep grief.

"My God! my God! is it possible—is it possible!" cried M. Secherin, hiding his face in his hands, as if totally overcome.

His mother went on to say: "Last night, I had the proof in my hands, I am sure of it—but that fiend snatched it from me. I was so terrified by her audacity, that I was speechless. And then, I thought that I would again fall back upon myself, and ask my God, what I should do. The whole of last night, I was considering this. I recollected what I had seen: their signs of mutual intelligence, their management, their stratagems. I prayed Heaven to enlighten me. This morning I came hither, I fell upon my knees, I besought your sainted father, who sees and hears us, to inspire me. My prayers were heard. I felt so sure—so convinced of that, concerning which I have sworn to you—sworn the sacred oath—do you mark me? You know me well. I would rather die than accuse the innocent, than condemn my soul to all eternity by a sacrilegious perjury. It *must be*, then, that this was a revelation from on high, which tells me that this wretch is guilty."

"It is true! my mother would not commit a sacrilege—she must be sure, and yet—my God! what must I believe?" murmured M. Secherin, in a deep hoarse voice, leaning his forehead on his two clenched hands, with a violent gesture of despair.

His mother raised her eyes to Heaven with an expression of supplicating tenderness; then drew near to her son, and leaned her venerable hands on his shoulders, and said to him, with an accent of ineffable pity and affection:

"You must believe your mother, my good child, for God has inspired her. He has, past question, chosen me, in order to break this cruel blow to you, because I only can console you, calm you, cure you. We shall live alone, henceforth, we two, as we were wont to live of old! Ah! you shall see! you shall see! You will scarcely discover the absence of that evil woman. You will find me here—ever here, I shall be with you still more, than I have been heretofore—because, do you see—I perceived that I was not necessary to your happiness, any longer, since she has been here. *She!* I did not dare to tell you so—but this gave me pain—oh! great pain! It is this that increased yet more the sadness I have ever felt, since the death of my late husband. But now I will try to be gay. I *will* be gay, in order to distract your sorrow. I will promise you—I am sure of it, I am sure of it—you shall see—you shall see;" said the poor mother, trying to smile through her tears. "I shall be happy once again to see my son my own—my own unquestioned right. I shall be glad and gay as I was in my early youth. I assure you, that I shall not suffer you to be careworn or lonely, one moment, while you are with me. My eyes are still good. Well! in the evening, I will read to you, while you are resting from your labours. Then I will pray to God for you beside your bed's head. You will sleep well, guarded by your mother's blessing. We shall lead together a very calm, a very sweet life. I assure you, that I will prove my love to you so deeply—oh! so deeply, that you will never regret it!"

At this moment the door opened, and Ursula entered. I am satisfied that she had been listening to all that passed, and skilfully chosen the moment for her entrance.

Foreseeing the grave trial of strength, which was about to occur, she had prepared herself for it by the extreme coquetry of her attire.

I think I can see her now, as she entered, calmly smiling and ingenuous—never did she look more lovely! She wore short sleeves, displaying her bare arms, exquisitely rounded and as white as snow. Her frock, of English muslin, with small blue figures on a white ground, rather low in the neck, displayed her lovely shoulders and the outline of her form, which was now perfection—for since her marriage, she had gained that plumpness which she lacked before. Her rich brown hair, profuse in its luxuriance, was dressed in waving folds over her brow, but fell in innumerable ringlets down her shoulders, and set off exquisitely her fair and rosy face. The long black fringe of her silken lashes half-veiled the light of her large, dark blue eyes; but, as she entered the door, she cast through them a stolen glance at her husband, and made a graceful little movement of her head, which scarcely could be called a nod.

So full of languid tenderness was that glance of Ursula, that M. Secherin, despite the tortures which surrounded him, could not prevent himself from blushing, and shuddering, as it were, from the effects of love and admiration.

His face, hitherto darkened by doubt and sadness, lightened up instantly. He fastened his greedy eyes, as if fascinated, upon his wife; and from that moment he seemed completely under the influence of her irresistible and maddening beauty.

I repeat it—never in all my life, had I seen Ursula so lovely.

She appeared utterly ignorant of what was going on, courtesied respectfully to her mother-in-law, and took a seat not very far from her, on an ottoman—leaned her beautiful arm on the cushion, and crossed her legs one over the other, in such a manner, that her dress discovered the instep of the prettiest little foot in the world, beautifully arched, and exquisitely set off by a morocco slipper, fashioned like a sandal.

If, in so grave a moment, I lay any stress on details seemingly so trivial, if I dwell even on Ursula's position in her seat, it is because I am convinced that everything, even to that very position, had been calculated, by my cousin, with a degree of shrewd subtlety and cunning coquetry that defies imagination to exceed it.

Was it by chance, or the result of quick observation—Ursula was seated precisely in the centre of the single sunbeam, which penetrated into that gloomy chamber through the half-open blinds!

Never shall I forget that striking contrast.

Here Ursula sat, splendid in the freshness of her beauty, of her youth, in the most fascinating dress, surrounded, as it were, by a luminous glory, which looked even more brilliant than it was, owing to the dim shadows of the closed chamber.

Farther off in the shadow was the mother of M. Secherin, disconsolate, clad in deep mourning, pale, despairing, bowed down by sorrow and old age.

Alas! when I saw that the victory in the cause now to be tried lay between these two women, the one of whom was trembling on the verge of the grave, the other just entering the threshold of most perfect womanhood, I was seized with dismay and sadness.

I was to be the witness of one of those fatal struggles common to the career of all, which put to the touch the most passionate and sacred sentiments of human life.

I felt a deep sympathy for that poor, aged mother, because she was aged, because she was a mother. My heart was shaken by a sad presentiment. I bethought me that—at the very moment when she was racking her ingenuity to find consolations for her son, recounting, with touching simplicity, all the amusements which she could devise to distract his sorrows, asking him what he should have to regret—at that very moment entered Ursula, beautiful, coquettish, daring, fascinating.

Fatal chance! fatal comparison! which seemed to say to that unhappy man—choose—you must either pass your future life with this woman, sad, austere, pious, withered by years and sorrows, or with this other, most enchanting, uniting in her person all the fascinations of her whole fascinating sex.

Doubtless, the motherly instinct of Madame Secherin revealed to her the greatness and the danger of the strife which awaited her. Her face had hitherto expressed no sentiments but those of tenderness and affection; but at the sight of Ursula, her brow darkened, her features contracted violently, and bore strong traces of the rage, the scorn, and the hatred, which affected them. Stunned, as it were, by Ursula's audacity, she held her peace for a moment, but then, recovering herself—

"What do you here?" she said, half-raising herself from her arm-chair, and showing her the door, with an imperious gesture—"Begone! Begone! —Hence!"

Ursula gazed at her mother-in-law for a moment, as if in deep and sincere astonishment; then she interrogated M. Secherin, with another glance, full of submissive sorrow.

"But mother———" said he hesitating.

"I will have it—she *must* go! I will not have her sully, with her presence, this chamber, which to me, at least, is sacred. She is unworthy to remain here—I insist that she shall go hence. My son!—do you hear me? —I insist!"

M. Secherin made a movement of impatience, and said to his mother, "But mother, we do not condemn people, without hearing them, at least!"

"You uphold her, then! you uphold her!" cried Madame Secherin, clasping her hands; then she repeated, as she let them fall, quite overpowered by her feelings, "He sustains her still!"

Ursula turned her great eyes, wherein a tear was beginning to sparkle, on her husband, and said to him, in a voice, trembling with agitation, "My God! my God! Husband, what does this mean? And you, madam," she added, turning to her with an air of supplication, "tell me, for God's sake, what I have done to you, to deserve this treatment?"

"What have you done? you have blasted the happiness of my son! you have unworthily, basely, betrayed him! But he is your dupe no longer. I have enlightened him; and he feels all the scorn—all the detestation—for you, which you deserve so richly."

At these words, uttered in a loud and violent voice, Ursula looked at her husband with an expression of the wildest agony, and sinking her head between her hands, cried out, in a reproachful tone,

"Oh! my beloved!"

She buried her face in the cushion of the ottoman, so far, that nothing could be seen of her person, but her beautiful bare shoulders, shaken by a quick, convulsive shudder.

"Mother!" said M. Secherin, stamping angrily, "why do you say that I feel scorn and detestation for my wife?"

"Because she deserves it. You well know that she deserves it. Come! come! my poor son, let us leave her;" and Madame Secherin made a movement as if to rise from her chair.

"This cannot pass so," said her son; "it will not do to accuse my wife, without giving me the proofs of what she has committed. Listen, my mother; the question turns upon the happiness or misery of my whole life. Do you think that I shall consent to sacrifice that very lightly?"

"Lightly! lightly! my son—when I have sworn to you that this woman is guilty?"

"Guilty! guilty! yes, it is easy to say that; but I cannot, for my part, surrender the whole happiness of my life, because you are convinced of a thing."

"All the happiness of your life—*she!* And what am I, then?" cried Madame Secherin, indignantly. "What am I?"

"But, my God! you are my mother. I respect you—I love you tenderly, devotedly; but," cried he, with a piercing tone, that told of inward anguish, "I love Ursula too, passionately—I love her as the first, the only woman I have ever loved, and I will never sacrifice her—no! I will never sacrifice her, unless I have proofs that your prejudices are too well founded."

"Do you accuse me of perjury, unhappy child?"

"I accuse you not. You tell me that my wife is guilty. Well, prove it to me!"

At this, Madame Secherin exclaimed, in a terrible voice, "Do you dare to ask me for other proofs, in the face of the oath I have made before God, who hears me—by the sacred memory of your father——"

"In Heaven's name! mother, be not angry with me. I would not, for the world, doubt your words; yet consider—you may be deceived, yourself, in all good faith—you may be blinded by the dislike which you feel to my wife, and you may take that for a revelation from on high, which may be in reality, but the effect of your prejudice against her. For since we are on this subject, I will tell you, that it is to-day only that I know, you do not like my wife; and that now explains many things to me."

"True! it is true! I hate her—yes! I despise her, because she has betrayed you basely—because she has dishonoured your name—and because I will not suffer a wretch like her to degrade a name which your father and I have always honoured."

Ursula only suffered a few audible sighs to escape from her. Her husband answered, reddening with anger, "My mother, there is such a thing as abusing their position. Once more! if you have proofs against my wife, produce them. Here she is; accuse her. If she cannot defend herself—if she be guilty—I will be pitiless to her. But, until then, insult her not; no! I will not suffer any one to insult her in my presence."

"Hearest thou! he threatens me! hearest thou, O my God!—threatens me in the very chamber wherein his father died."

"Heavens! my mother! pardon me, pardon me," cried M. Secherin, throwing himself on his knees at the feet of his mother, and seizing her hand, which she withdrew scornfully. Suddenly my cousin lifted up her charming face, all bedewed with tears.

I looked at her attentively. For the first time, I perceived what, until then, I had never noticed—that her eyes, although bathed in tears, were neither red nor swollen. They showed, perhaps, even more brilliant than their wont, through the limpid drops which flowed so becomingly, I might almost say so coquettishly, when compared to the bitter and convulsive bursts of unfeigned sorrow.

I understood, then, only, that it was possible for a person to remain beautiful while weeping. The most enchanting features, until then, had ever appeared to me disfigured by that convulsive play of the muscles produced by violent weeping. At the movement of Ursula, as she raised herself up, her husband turned toward her.

"My beloved husband!" she said in a firm voice, touching, and at the same time dignified, "never will I be the cause of a disagreement between you and your mother. I have had the misfortune to displease her. I submit myself to my fate. She affirms to you that I am guilty. She attests it to you by a solemn oath. Do her not the wrong to disbelieve her. Believe her—forget me, as a woman unworthy of your name. Matilda will carry me back to my father. You will remain with your mother, and by your tenderness, will make up to her for the grief which I have—oh! how involuntarily, caused her.

Madame Secherin looked sternly at her daughter-in-law:

"And do you fancy, that you can so repay the wrongs you have done my son? He might have married a woman worthy of himself. Thanks to you, here he is, alone, fettered for life! Happily, I remain to him. I will console him for all."

"Ah! fear not that, madam—I feel it here!" and Ursula leaned her two hands on her heart; "your son will soon be free; he can choose more happily, then." And her voice was as grave and mournful as though her tomb were already open to receive her.

M. Secherin could not endure the last incident. He burst into tears, fell at his mother's feet, turned round to Ursula, and seizing her hand, covered it with kisses, addressing her in a broken voice—

"My poor sweet wife—calm yourself—calm yourself. My mother thinks not what she says; heed her not. Pardon me; do I accuse you? Can I live without you? Am I not certain of your heart?"

The true and heartfelt grief of this admirable man moved me indeed deeply. I was disgusted with the base treachery of Ursula, but what could I say? Madame Secherin, when she perceived this quick revulsion in the feelings of her son, exclaimed—

"You sacrifice me, then, to this hypocrite? A few false tears, then, are enough to set her in the right and your mother in the wrong!"

M. de Secherin sprang to his feet, and answered, though it seemed difficult for him to control his indignation:

"Do you wish, then, to drive me mad, mother? For the last time—have you, or have you not, proof against my wife? You believe that Chopinelle makes his court to her, loves her? Is it not so? Well! for me, I believe it not! You believe that the letter he wrote her yesterday, was a declaration of love? Well! for me, I believe it not! You say that my wife will make me unhappy. Well! for me, I declare to you that hitherto she has made me the happiest of men! I have innumerable proofs of Ursula's affection, of her love, of her tenderness! Now, if she is accused, I want proofs—positive proofs, of her treachery. Never shall I have the courage to sacrifice my happiness to your antipathies!"

"But, I shall have the courage to sacrifice the dearest hope of my life to your mother's happiness, my dearest husband," cried Ursula, with dignified emotion. "My presence here is odious to her. Well, then, it is for me to withdraw hence. Never forget that your mother is your mother! Even from your childhood up, she has loaded you with cares and affection. As for me, it is but a little year that I have loved you. My love, then, cannot be compared to her's. If I were so happy as to have consecrated long years to your affection; I might have then hoped to struggle with success against unjust prejudices—though they come from your mother, whom I respect, whom I love. But, alas! I have done so little for you, I have so few rights on which to insist, that I will undergo my lot without complaining. Farewell! farewell! for ever!"

Ursula took one step toward the door, covering her face with her hands. Her husband hurried after her, caught her in his arms, brought her back, forced her to sit down, and turning again toward Madame Secherin, cried:

"You see then, now, my mother, that she is an angel—an angel of Heaven's own! not one complaint, not one reproach! and you have treated her as the worst of creatures."

Madame Secherin smiled bitterly. "Are you so blind, so mad, as to believe her hypocritical protestations? Do you not see, that it is her want of power to defend herself that makes her play the victim—that she is willing to go hence even with shame upon her head?"

"No, madam. Believe not that," Ursula answered sadly. "I am silent, because I respect, because I admire the sentiment which dictates your conduct. Yes! madam, in my eyes there is nothing more holy, than the love of a mother for her son. If I dared to compare the love of a wife for her husband, to that holy affection, I would say, that I comprehended all the jealousies—yes! all the blind devotion which you feel; because, I myself, am capable of experiencing the same. One word more, madam: from the beginning of this cruel discussion, Matilda, my cousin, my more than sister, has remained silent. You know her virtues—you know her sincerity; had she believed me guilty, despite all her friendship, despite all the bonds which have united us, she would have condemned me. Alas! madam, I know how much she suffers, at being thus unable to defend me; but to defend me, is to accuse you—to accuse you, is a species of sacrilege—therefore is she compelled to keep silence!"

"You too! you too! and do you, too, sustain her?" cried the unhappy mother, clasping her hands with anguish, as she turned toward me—"But no! no! that is impossible—speak then—speak out! let not this guilty wretch be enabled to say that your silence absolves her."

What could I do? accuse my cousin—for that, I had not the resolution! I only answered, then, "Madam, appearances are too often deceitful, and—"

"You see now, mother, my cousin is convinced of her innocence," cried M. Secherin.

"What matters that?" said Ursula, still very sadly. "My cousin may in vain proclaim my innocence—for, between myself and your mother, my beloved husband, you cannot doubt for a moment. Only, madam," cried Ursula, in a voice interrupted by tears, "as I would wish to carry away with me, as the sole consolation of my life, the esteem of the man to whom I would have devoted my life with happiness, had I been permitted to do so—only, madam, allow me to justify myself—will you not? Permit me to ask you this: can you cite one fact which condemns me? Allow me this madam—oh! allow me this!"

"Certainly—oh! beyond doubt—you are so full of tact, so cunning, that you have taken care not to be caught by all my surveillance," cried Madame Secherin, almost beyond herself at so assured a falsehood. "Ah, now! I suffer for my own weakness! If, when I first entertained suspicions, I had revealed them to my son, he could have watched you better. I am old, I am infirm: I had not strength, or address to strive against you. But have you not remained for hours shut up with this M. Chopinelle, under the pretext of singing with him?"

"Heavens! madam! You have come many times into the room wherein I was. My husband, moreover, requested me to sing with his friend."

"But do you not understand," replied Madame Secherin, "that it is just because I have no certain proof of your guilt; while, at the same time I am as certain of it as I am of my own existence, that the Good Lord has granted me the courage to take a sacred oath, so to convict you of deceit! and then, that letter: that letter, yesterday, would have convicted you. You well knew what you were about, when you risked everything to recover it."

"Again this letter! There is no meaning in this," said M. Secherin; "turning to my wife's disadvantage a little kindness on her part toward me."

"Heavens! I take the Heavens to witness that I am innocent!" cried Ursula, casting herself at the feet of Madame Secherin. "You see quite plainly, that there is no real proof against me. I submit to all. I will abandon my husband—I will see him no more. I will quit your house. I will go and live in obscurity, in grief, in regret—but suffer me, at least, to carry with me my honour, and the esteem of my husband. I ask but that—Oh! but that, to enable me to support the few days that alone remain to me. You are good, generous—it is the blind love which you feel for your son that sets you thus against me. Be only just—have only pity on your poor Ursula, who would so well have loved to call you her mother!"

And as she spoke, she would have raised the hand of her mother-in-law to her lips; but Madame Secherin repulsed her harshly, and said, "Touch me not, infamous hypocrite!"

This, M. Secherin could not endure. He raised his wife gently by the arm, and said to her in a voice trembling with emotion,

"Rise, Ursula! rise up, my good and honoured wife! Enough of humiliation you have borne already. I am the only judge, and I declare you innocent. *Let them say what they will—let them do what they will*—I shall regard you always as the dearest, as the best of women."

"Wretched man! This is no longer blindness—it is madness!" exclaimed Madame Secherin. "But, beware! You will but cover yourself with so deep ridicule, in making yourself the dupe of this woman, that people will cease even to compassionate you."

These last words of Ursula's mother-in-law were a great mistake. They wounded the self-love of M. Secherin to the quick; and it was with anger and irritation that he replied,

"Well—if it be so, I would rather be ridiculous than unjust, treacherous, and malignant."

"For whom do you intend those words, my son? Answer me!"

"I shall not explain—this scene has lasted but too long already! It has caused bitter grief to my wife, to you, to me. Anything that you can now add would be useless. I am determined, that I will suffer no more attacks to be made on this angel of sweetness and of goodness."

"Do you dare threaten me in your father's house? Threaten me to sustain a wretch who mocks you in her own heart, the while?"

"My mother, push me not too far. I repeat it to you. Whatever you may say—whatever you may do—I will always love, always respect my wife, always defend her against whosoever shall attack her!"

"Against me? against me, do you mean? Dare you repeat it—wretched, ungrateful child!"

"Well, yes! if you will have it so. Yes! yes! even against you, if you attack her unjustly," answered M. Secherin, unable any longer to contain himself. "She wishes only for my happiness—you would render me unhappy, by torturing that which I love best in the wide world."

Ursula, extended on the ottoman, kept her head hidden in her hands, and wept profusely.

The face of Madame Secherin wore a most melancholy expression; she said, in a firm and strongly accentuated voice, "My son, you know that my will is irrevocable—either that woman shall leave your father's house, or I will—either you shall stay here with me, or go hence with her. Never will I see you more, so long as I live!"

"My mother——"

"Madam," I cried, "beware—yield not to a first passionate movement."

"I tell you, my son," exclaimed Madame Secherin, again, "that if you do not abandon this woman on the instant, I will never see you more so long as I live. You shall go hence both of you—and, as I shall no more have a child, I will destroy my will, and leave my personal fortune to the poor!"

"And do you think, my mother," answered M. Secherin, "that I am such a wretch as to be swayed by that consideration—to be moved by the love of money?"

"Yes! I do, *now*—for that woman has made you as avaricious, as greedy, as interested as she is herself. To deprive you of your inheritance is one means of punishing you both."

"And so, my mother, you will drive me out of my father's house, because I will not share your blind hatred against my own wife?"

"Yes! yes! I drive you out, unnatural son! I drive you out, that I may not have under my eyes this cursed creature. I drive you out—" and here the voice, the accents, the very features of the hapless mother, entirely changed their expression, and she cried, melting into tears—"I drive you out, oh! my God! because I could not endure to see you constantly betrayed! I drive you out, that you may not see me die of grief, and by your doing."

These last words were pronounced with so much soul, with a despair so thoroughly maternal, that M. Secherin ran back to his mother, cast himself at her feet, and cried, "Pardon! Pardon!"

At this instant Ursula uttered a deep groan, she let her head fall back upon the cushion of the ottoman, her arm hanging down to the ground—she appeared to faint.

Chance again brought it to pass, that her position was enchanting, full of sweet languid grace. Her cheeks were of the richest hue of health, while from her drooping lids trickled a tear or two pure and transparent as the morning dew. Her breast beat violently—two or three times she raised her hand, as it were, mechanically to her corsage, as if she felt a painful oppression.

I scarcely believed in the reality of this fainting fit, and yet I could not but run up to her.

"But you are killing her—see you are killing her!" cried M. Secherin, almost despairing, and rushing to his wife. The rage of Madame Secherin again burst forth and she said in a voice of furious wrath—

"She deludes you! This fainting is a farce like all the rest—care not for it—she will soon come to herself, hypocrite that she is!"

"Ah this is indeed horrible," cried Monsieur Secherin. "Have you no pity, even? well! since you will have it so—we will part—we will part for ever! after those words, I could never bear to look upon you without grief."

"Unworthy son! the Lord will punish you by your own sins! Go! and I curse——"

"Madam, he is your son!"—and rushing toward her, I stopped the curse as it reached her lips.

"No! I will not—I will not curse him. He has lost his reason. God has withdrawn himself from him—let him remain with the vile woman—the punishment is frightful—but he deserves it."

And the miserable mother left the room. M. Secherin, kneeling by Ursula, covered her face, her hands, her hair, her brow with tears and kisses, calling her name aloud. "But she is dying!" he cried. "Unlace her corsets—do you not see that she is dying?"

The end of this scene was, alas! as might have been expected; the nervous fit of Ursula ceased within a few minutes after her mother had retired. As she came to herself again, Ursula burst into tears, and persisted in her resolution of returning to her father's house. It would now, she said, be impossible for her to remain with her mother-in-law.

I strove in vain to make her perceive the possibility of a reconciliation—but no! she chose to *sacrifice herself*. Before the influence of this scene, to him but too irresistible, M. Secherin's last doubts gave way. That very evening he announced to his mother, that they would go and live in a neighbouring house, which was at that time for sale. The separation was determined, and arranged definitively.

At the very moment when M. Secherin had announced this sad news to me, I heard a noise of horses in the yard—I ran to the window, it was my husband—it was Gontran!

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE RETURN AND DEPARTURE.

I FELL weeping into the arms of Gontran. Emotions such as these cannot be described. He had come back to me preserved—preserved from the most fearful risk that a man can run.

I saw his fine features altered, fatigue and recent affliction had left their heavy traces on his countenance.

He was very kind to me—inexpressibly affectionate; twenty times he begged my pardon for the involuntary sorrows he had caused me, promising that he would make me forget them by dint of love and attention.

I might almost venture to say, that I did not regret those terrible events, which had so bitterly afflicted me during the last few months—so splendid was the contrast between their mournful gloom, and my present situation. That which predominated above all the other feelings, which formed a sort of mass of agreeable emotions, produced by the return of Gontran; was a sort of deep tranquillity, of entire confidence in the future. It seemed to me that my life had been so sternly tried already, that I could, without exorbitant expectation, look forward to a life of happiness and tranquillity.

It was strange—before the arrival of Gontran, I was sometimes alarmed when I tried to fancy to myself the feelings which I should experience on his return, when I thought of his desperate and evil action. It was in vain—when unable to excuse him—that I said to myself, I should have done as he has. I nevertheless dreaded my first impression. But when I again saw him, I forgot completely the shameful deed of which he had been guilty.

I was now engaged chiefly by the desire of concealing from him the terrible night which I had passed in the house of M. Lugarto. But I was also anxious to see, how M. de Lancry would disguise from me the real motives for his abrupt departure and return. I feared that he would tell falsehoods with too good a grace—that would have rendered me distrustful of him for the rest of his life.

I understood well the reason, why he had hitherto concealed from me the fatal secret which existed between himself and M. Lugarto. For this confession could not have saved Gontran, and would have subjected me to the most cruel terrors. But he had now to account to me for a long absence, and I did not wish to find him bringing too much imagination into play, in accounting to me for it My fears were not realized; Gontran avoided the necessity of falsehood, if I may so speak, by telling me much of the truth. He said that he was under great monetary obligations to M. Lugarto; and moreover, that the latter had obtained possession of some very important papers, which might have compromised not his own honour only, but that of a noble family.

Leaving me to imagine, though not saying so directly, that the letters of a woman were in question.

M. de Lancry added, that in order to obtain possession of these papers, which were no longer in the power of M. Lugarto, he had been compelled to go to England, where, after innumerable difficulties, he had at last obtained and destroyed them.

Unfortunately, I was so much occupied by thinking of the manner in which Gontran would deceive me, that I never recollected that there were several important events, which I, too, must conceal from him. My husband asked me several times, if I had seen M. Lugarto since the period of his own departure!

But as M. de Mortagne had desired me to do, I replied, as I had before written to M. de Lancry, that I had set out for Touraine; preferring Ursula's society to remaining alone in Paris.

From M. de Lancry's questions, it was easy to perceive that he was at a loss to understand what could have induced M. Lugarto to surrender the forgery, which, up to this time, he had so carefully preserved. My husband wished to discover if it was at my prayers, or through my influence that he had been brought to make this restitution.

I repented, indeed, many times my being led to conceal anything from M. de Lancry; but remembering the advice of M. de Mortagne, and the promise I had made him, I resolved to keep my counsel.

Doubtless Gontran was afraid of exciting my suspicions by asking me any more leading questions, for he spoke no more of M. Lugarto.

There was another thing that distressed me. M. Mortagne had paid my husband's debts to M. de Lugarto; and it appeared to me, that when Gontran should propose to pay him, the whole would probably be discovered. But M. de Lancry re-assured me on this point, by observing, that he would pay M. Lugarto at a later date, keeping account of the interest becoming due.

These explanations given and received, Gontran appeared to be delivered from a vast weight of anxiety. His countenance expressed a sort of careless confidence which I had not seen there even before his marriage. Nothing could be more natural. Ever since I had known him, he had been subject to the threats of M. Lugarto.

Alas! shall I own it? I was for a moment so unjust toward Providence, as almost to regret the shade of melancholy and of sorrow, which grief had hitherto cast over the lineaments of Gontran.

Foolishly I imagined, that while unhappy he was more my own. Seeing him so young, so handsome, so gay, so brilliant, and above all, so free from any melancholy pre-occupation, I feared for the future.

I had already felt the miserable anguish of jealousy; and yet Gontran, while paying attention to the Princess de Ksernika, had but obeyed the order of Lugarto: and if Gontran was at that time the prey of overpowering wretchedness—if he were in hourly dread of being dishonoured, and yet could make himself so charming to that woman, what would it have been if his own taste or caprice had led him to her feet?

Soon, however, I cast aside these sad reflections, as if they were an outrage on the happiness that awaited me.

Alas! these fears were but too prophetic.

I informed Gontran of the rupture which had taken place between M. Secherin and his mother, but without mentioning the cause. Ursula's secret did not belong to me. I attributed them to questions of interest, slight, at first, but gradually growing more serious, the determination of my cousin to live henceforth apart from his mother.

Gontran appeared to me seriously annoyed at not being able to remain, as he had intended, a few days at Rouvrai.

The delay, he said, would have sufficed for the execution of certain necessary alterations at the castle of Maran—necessary in order to render it habitable, for it had not been occupied for many years. But the unfortunate quarrel which had broken out between my cousin and her mother-in-law, made it impossible for us to prolong our stay at Rouvrai.

In vain, on the next day, finding myself alone for a few minutes with M. Secherin, I wished anew to try to effect a reconciliation between him and his mother; but he appeared to me even more enraged against her than on the previous evening.

Ursula had continued to play her part with all her wonted tact. She had not permitted herself to utter one word of recrimination against her mother-law; she understood, she admired, she said, that affectionate jealousy, which led a mother even to require the sacrifice of her daughter-in-law. Her husband had but to say one word and she bowed her head in submission!—if it must be, she would abandon the husband of her choice, in order to please Madame Secherin.

The angelic sweetness of Ursula had thus exasperated M. Secherin yet more against his mother; while she, like all persons of resolute and decided character, showed herself more and more inflexible toward Ursula.

I went to find Madame Secherin to make her my adieus—but it was vainly that I spoke to her of her son, of the loneliness and solitude, in which she would live hereafter: she would hear nothing but that he should cast off his wife.

What proved to me, above all, the fatal influence which Ursula had exercised over the mind of my cousin, was, that I found him, who had been so good a son, of a heart so generous and noble, almost indifferent to this separation. He said his mother would grow calmer; and then that he would come and see her every day. He was almost glad that it had taken place now, for sooner or later a separation must infallibly have come to pass.

The accusation of Madame Secherin was now, in the opinion of her son a pretext for getting rid of her daughter-in-law, whom she never had been able to endure, because she loved her son too much! Yes, cousin, cried M. Secherin, that is the whole of the question—she is jealous because my wife loves me too much.

Alas! chance reserved for me another and a very cruel blow, which, in its consequences, really appeared to be a spite of fortune.

The day following his arrival, Gontran had gone out to give some directions concerning our departure, which was to take place in the afternoon. I had profited by the opportunity to have a long conversation with M. Secherin, which took place while we were walking in one of those avenues of dense and overbowering yoke-elms, in the gardens of which I have spoken.

My cousin left me, and I remained sitting in a meditative mood behind a group of painted stone figures representing a shepherd and shepherdess. These statues, common enough to gardens of the last century, stood at the end of the alley of which I have been speaking, on a square stone pedestal surrounded by four benches.

I was placed so that my back was turned to the avenue, and my person was entirely concealed by the height of the monument.

I know not wherefore—but instead of thinking about Gontran, and my renewed happiness, I was musing on the treachery of Ursula; for since the scene of the previous evening, she had continually avoided me.

Suddenly, I heard her voice talking with some one. It drew nearer—a sudden throbbing of my heart told me it was Gontran to whom she was speaking—I listened—it was right.

Instead of rising and going to join Ursula and my husband, the base thought crossed my mind of listening to their conversation. Without a reason—without a motive, a gleam of jealousy, quick as the lightning flash, traversed my heart! I held my breath—I listened keenly.

Now that I question myself in cool blood, whether I acted thus on the spur of any suspicion, I must reply that I did not. I am forced to admit, that I entertained none: the resolution was taken instantaneously—it was almost involuntary.

I listened keenly. The gravel, crackling under the feet of Ursula and Gontran, as they walked, prevented me, at first, from hearing what they said distinctly. When they were but a few paces distant from me. I caught these words, uttered by Ursula in her softest and most melancholy tone:

"*So sad is this solitude—for it is indeed to be alone, to remain thus*———"

I could hear no more. Gontran and she, as they reached the end of the alley, turned away, and the sounds of their steps no longer came to my ears.

There was nothing in the words of Ursula which I had heard, to shock or astonish me. My cousin, faithful to her mania for being thought a wretched and unappreciated woman, was repeating to Gontran, the romantic falsehood which she had repeated to me so often. And then, too, it might not have been herself of whom she was speaking.

Nevertheless, I felt a blow at my heart, so cutting and so deeply painful, that all my future prospects, which had seemed but a few moments before so bright and beautiful, were overspread as it were by a dark funereal veil—that I was smitten by a bitter and invincible foreboding.

Why, I said to myself, should I experience so deep, so painful an emotion, on overhearing a few unmeaning words? Do they indeed conceal some treachery—some falsehood?

Still under the impression of the cruel scene of the previous evening, I almost thought I could perceive in the mysterious fear which agitated me, a divine revelation, like that which so fruitlessly enlightened Madame Secherin on the misconduct of my guilty cousin.

I cannot describe the agony of anxiety with which I waited for the second turn of Gontran and Ursula's walk. One moment, I blushed with shame to think of the base espial to which I was condescending. I even made a movement to rise and withdraw, but a fatal curiosity held me back.

I heard them again drawing near. My heart began to bound so briskly that it seemed as if each pulsation was regulated by the light and measured sound of their footsteps.

This time it was the voice of Gontran which I heard. Oh! how well I remember every note of that clear, softly-pitched voice, with its low, graceful softness—so low that I heard but these words,

"*You remember then—you say—you remember? Oh! you were so——*"

The rest of the sentence was lost to me; they had again turned, and were retiring. Alas! in these words of Gontran there was nothing more than in the former that could give me any grounds for suspicion—and yet, when I knew to whom they were addressed, they wounded me.

What could be the remembrances which he was evoking? What could it be that she remembered? Then I recollected that about a month before my marriage, Gontran had seen Ursula almost daily at my aunt's—and then—misery of miseries! I recollected that Ursula had told me, a thousand times, how delightful she thought my husband; and how she told me that I was the happiest of women, and that happiness like mine had not been made for her.

Then—misery of miseries! I bethought me of the humiliation and rage of Ursula, when Mademoiselle de Maran with her devilish malice had drawn out the vulgarity of M. Secherin in Gontran's presence.

Knowing the treachery, the deep dissimulation, the corruptness of my cousin; had I not, then, good cause to fear her taking vengeance on me for the sufferings she had undergone daily at my aunt's hands? who had probably inflicted them in the malicious hope of seeing me one day the victim of her barbarous reprisals.

Doubtless, my aunt with hideous sagacity had guessed, even from the birth of Ursula, the faults and vices which would be so fatal to me me in their development—for it was clear that our girlish friendship, as well as our relationship, would one day draw us closely together.

These sad reflections were interrupted by their returning steps. Gontran was again speaking, and this time his accent was gay and full of merry ridicule. Ursula answered in the same strain, for I heard a burst of her sweet and ringing laughter.

Gontran replied—"*You will see that I am right; you will see. I should like to prove it to you.*"

"*Take* care, cousin," replied Ursula, in a tone of gay and coquettish reproach. "*You are mad—It is a horror to——*"

And she—why should she—tell him, so coquettishly, that he was *mad?* Heaven! about what could they have been talking?

Alas! I remember that I was so stupidly simple, as to be almost angry that my cousin and my husband were not talking about me. For there is so much childish selfishness in grief—the moment we begin to suffer, we fancy ourselves so interesting—so worthy of pity—that, in unreasonable despair, we expect kind sentiments even from those whose actions at the moment wound us.

Thus, I said bitterly, "How is it, that Gontran and Ursula, who love me so much, are not thinking of me at this moment? Nothing, however, could be more natural than that they should do so. Nay, more! it proves, since they are not doing so, that they must needs be occupied by some very strong feelings."

Alas! I now blush at these senseless reasonings; but I begin to understand that grief is never more intense, never more frightful, than when the reasonings it inspires are senseless and illogical.

The steps again drew nigh. I even thought, that Gontran and Ursula walked slower than before—that from time to time they stopped.

Gontran said, in a soft and suppliant voice, "*I beseech you—that—that, at least——*"

The footstep ceased, and Ursula replied, in an accent of strong emotion.

"*You do not think of it—it would be too painful—you know not how many tears I have drowned since. But hold! I am becoming madder, even than you are! You make me say what I would not say—you do not deserve—*" and what followed, was spoken in a voice so rapid, and as she walked, so quickly, that I could not detect its meaning.

I thought I should have fainted; my situation was too horrible. The most violent suspicions rent my heart asunder; and all for some scraps of conversation, that had no sense at all, but that with which my unreasonable jealousy invested them.

After these terrors, followed doubts, and then a gleam of hope. Admitting that Ursula was base enough to desire to win Gontran, (and I did not consider, then, I wronged her in believing so—for had she not already strayed from her duty, for a vulgar fool?) admitting, said I, this baseness,—would Gontran—he to whom I have bowed my very life—to whom I have hitherto given so much joy and happiness—would Gontran,—for whom of late I have suffered so deeply, find courage in his heart, so to wrong me, and for her?

Never! oh, never!—it is impossible! I said. I do not thus escape from one gulf of agony and despair, only to fall back in one deeper still.

No! no! it is impossible. Gontran came hither only yesterday—goes hence to-day. It is impossible, that in an hour's conversation, he should have tried to win, much less that he should have won, this woman; or that he should dream of deceiving me.

Ursula is, indeed, most audacious; but the most shameless woman keeps up a fair exterior.

And then, again, to these gleams of hope succeeded the most overwhelming doubts. All that Madame de Richeville had said to me of Gontran's light and selfish character, rushed on my soul at once.

Ursula appeared to me more dangerous and fascinating. If my husband should meet her in Paris, might she not, under the guise of friendship, come constantly even to my house?

That idea, and the other fancies which I had for a few moments repressed, now so completely overpowered me, that, without thinking of it, I abruptly unmasked my ambuscade, and coming out suddenly from my hiding-place, I entered the alley

Ursula and Gontran were very far off, at the other end of the walk, where I saw M. Secherin join them and accompany them toward the house. Now, then, I breathed more freely. I remained some time longer in the garden.

By a strange and fantastic change of impressions, no sooner had Ursula withdrawn, and calmness had again entered in my heart, than I was ashamed of my weakness, and reproached myself with not enjoying, quietly, that happiness which Providence was bestowing on me. Was I not going to Maran alone with Gontran? Were not the charming days of the *chalet* of Chantilly about to be renewed? Winter was far off. If I feared the coquetry of Ursula with my husband, I had the means of keeping her at a distance. At least, should it come to the worst, I thought I would tell my husband the adventure of M. Chopinelle, and then he would feel nothing but contempt for Ursula.

By what fantastic contrast could this fit of infatuated confidence have succeeded to well-founded doubts? I cannot explain it.

Before leaving Rouvrai, I went to take leave of Madame Secherin. I found her calm, dignified, resolute. She stretched out her hand to me—I kissed it with pious veneration.

"This evening," she said, "my son and his wife leave this house. Hereafter, I shall live alone waiting for my son's return. Yes," she said, in reply to my look of surprise, "one day my son will be restored to me. The good God tells me so! He will leave me long enough on earth to see my son very wretched—but long enough, also, to console him."

I was much struck with the tone—I had almost said of inspiration, with which Madame Secherin pronounced these last words.

"You are good—you are generous: you, like me, are convinced, I am sure that this woman is a wretch; but you lacked the courage to accuse her! Had you taken part with me, she had been lost! I say not this to reproach you! on the contrary, I will pray the Lord that she whom you have spared, may not one day cause you much wo!"

"How! madam?" I exclaimed, feeling my suspicions awakening at her words.

"I tell you, that with which my gracious God inspires me—no more."

Alas! her words seemed but too prophetic, particularly when I dwelt on the scene I had witnessed in the alley. The moment of departure came; Ursula embraced me with all her wonted show of affection My cousin bade us adieu, with his usual frank, manly cordiality.

Nothing, in either Gontran's manner or his words, gave me cause to suspect that he parted from Ursula with regret.

We left that house, which had, on my arrival, been so calm and healthful, but which had, since my coming, been the scene of such terrible dissensions.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE CHATEAU OF MARAN.

In proportion as we departed from Rouvrai, I felt that the oppression of my spirits was by degrees vanishing. Very soon, I had forgotten almost entirely the grievous emotion which had shaken me, in the delirious happiness I felt at being once more alone with my husband.

I delighted myself with the prospect of this journey, by calling back to mind the tender words and delicate attentions with which Gontran had loaded me, when, after my marriage, we had departed for Chantilly.

I discovered, in my own imagination, a strong resemblance between these two epochs of my life. Now, as before, I was setting out with Gontran to enjoy the delights of a long sojourn among the peaceful and delicious solitudes of nature.

This impression of happiness was so deeply fixed in my mind, this hope was so radiant, that they prevailed over all my other fancies. I waited with anxiety for the first words of Gontran. Since we had left Rouvrai, he had been altogether silent.

I adduced a thousand reasons to explain to my heart, that his first word, when spoken, must needs be full of graciousness and love. I said to myself, almost with satisfaction, that my husband had committed some wrongs toward me, with which he must needs reproach himself; and that he would doubtless now atone for them, by those sweet flatteries and exquisite attentions, the art of applying which he possessed in so eminent a degree.

Suddenly, M. de Lancry yawned once or twice, leaned his head against one of the cushions of the carriage, and without saying one word, fell fast asleep, almost in a moment.

This seeming indifference at first hurt me grievously; and I could not refrain from tears, when I contrasted it with the assiduous tenderness of Gontran during our previous journey. I asked myself sadly, in what respect I less deserved it now than before. Ought I not, on the contrary, to be dearer to him than ever? Had I not already suffered bitterly for him?

But reflection followed gravely upon this first angry moment of vexation.

I was ashamed of myself. I accused myself of selfishness, and of the most ridiculous and romantic exaggeration. What could be simpler, what more natural, than this sleep of Gontran, with which I had been on the point of reproaching him? Ought he to constrain himself to formal rules in my presence? Did it not, on the contrary, manifest the very confidence and security of his affection? I dried up my tears, and set myself to watch his features. There were no longer upon them the traces of that fatigue, and those sorrows, which had so sadly altered them. Never had he appeared to me so handsome, so full of that delicate and charming softness which rendered his features so attractive. One of those half-smiles which always tell of happy and peaceful slumbers, played on his lips, and gave to his mouth a beautiful expression of humorous malice. Twice he moved his lips slightly, as if he were about to speak; I listened eagerly, but could detect no words.

As I saw him sleep there, so handsome, calm, and smiling, I felt that I shared myself all the happiness which he now enjoyed. Free from the odious dominion of M. Lugarto—young, rich, idolized by me, could there be any man in the world more happily situated? Did he not unite, in his own person, all the advantages that can be comprised in human happiness?

As I dwelt thus on his qualities, I was alarmed for a moment. We were to remain at Maran until the beginning of the winter; this long prospect of solitude, to me would be charming; but would it please Gontran?

I began to distrust myself—I began to fear that I should lack the means of pleasing my husband. I had undergone, already, so much sorrow that I no longer experienced those bursts of gaiety, with which the presence of Gontran used to inspire me. I compared what I was before my marriage, or even during our happy stay at Chantilly, with what I was now, on my arrival at Maran; and despite myself, I was again seized by my foolish fears.

I fancied that I had grown ugly; and then I asked myself, whether I still possessed charms enough to please my husband during the long and lonely days which we were about to spend together. Then, that conversation in the alley, which for the moment I had forgotten, returned to my mind. I began to exaggerate my imperfections—to detract from my advantages—to envy the wit, the manners of Ursula—to envy her the expression of her countenance, by turns animated and coquettish, tender or melancholy, or sweetly *naïve.*

Without foolish pride, I knew that I possessed more regular beauty than my cousin. I knew that I had sterling qualities—a frank, good heart—a tried sincerity—an unbounded devotion to my husband; a devotion which had been often tried, and never yet found wanting. I could not doubt, that Ursula was a liar, a dissembler, a profound despiser of all that elevated, honourable souls revere.

Well! can you conceive, that when I thought that she, perhaps, pleased Gontran, I began to regret that I did not resemble her. Oh! sacrilege! I even went so far as to disdain the virtues which I possessed, and to envy the virtues which I had not.

Alas! alas! and yet men know not how, by showing peculiar preferences, they debase, oftentimes, the haughtiest and most generous natures. They know not, that when women love passionately, madly, they wish to be loved again, at all times, and that, however virtuous they may be, a blasphemous distrust will at times arise—a distrust of the noblest qualities, as if they were vain and useless, when they perceive themselves sacrificed to women, who possess the seductive qualities of hypocrisy only, and daring, and corruption.

Then, as ever is the case, after this mood of despair, after these pitiless humiliations, which I inflicted on myself, came fits of pride, exactly the opposite—a re-action, as it were, of absurd haughtiness. I asked myself what my cousin possessed, that could be compared with my endowments; what pledges of happiness she could have given to my husband? But as quickly, I fell back, crushed beneath the weight of this humble thought—what matters it, if he loves her as she is?

During the whole journey Gontran was absent, and gloomily silent. I attributed his mood to the political changes which were taking place, and to which I did not believe him to be so indifferent as he pretended.

I have forgotten to say, that while on the journey, we heard of the revolution of July.

Stranger as I was to politics, I felt deep and respectful pity for the good old king, who was returning, doubtless for the last time, to a land of exile, far from that France which he loved so well, and which his family had watered with their blood. I had always seen the people happy and tranquil—had seen personal celebrity attain advantages equal at least, if not superior, to those enjoyed by the highest aristocracy. I did not then understand the good or the advantage of that social regeneration, which was promised to arise from the bloody barricades of 1830.

I was extremely anxious to reach Maran. Blondeau had often told me that my mother spent two summers at Maran, and that she had accompanied her, when I was scarcely two years old. Never, she said, had my mother been so happy as in that solitude, where she was sheltered from the malignity of Mademoiselle de Maran, and from the icy indifference of my father.

I was delighted to know that from that day the Castle had been uninhabited—these recollections so precious in my eyes, seemed to be more complete, more sacredly preserved by that very fact.

Blondeau promised to give me a thousand pieces of information, touching the apartments my mother had occupied, and the walks she was wont to take. It was with a religious interest that I approached that habitation which, for so many reasons, I held sacred. It seemed to me that once there, in that place whose everything would speak to me of my mother, I should be under her invisible protection—that from the high heaven she would watch over her child—that she would pray the merciful Lord and God to inflict on me no new trials. Many times, I had found occasion to admire the delicacy and the tact of Gontran; and now I felt assured that he would share my enthusiastic veneration for that ancient dwelling of my family.

When I was leaving Rouvrai, I had written to Blondeau, desiring her to join me instantly at Maran; and M. de Lancry, as he passed through Paris, had sent a part of our establishment to the estate, which is situated a few leagues from Vendome. We arrived there on a fine summer morning.

A long avenue of immemorial oaks gave access to the court of honour. It was necessary to cross two bridges over a little river butting the walls of the chateau, which was built of brick and composed of a great *corps de logis*, with two large wings at right angles to the main building, in the taste of Louis XIII. The last bridge which gave admission to the first court, closed by a railing of ornamented iron-work parallel to the main building, was of stone.

The vegetation in the neighbourhood of the chateau was magnificent. Oaks, Lombardy poplars, and elms, grew to an enormous size; and vast tracts of meadow, swept away almost beyond the reach of sight, and were bounded on the far horizon by vast masses of forest.

The steward, forewarned of our approach by the courier, received us at the wicket, and conducted us to a vast gallery on the ground-floor, which was filled with old family pictures.

The six windows of this vast apartment opened on the moat filled with running water, which surrounded the castle. Notwithstanding the heat of the summer, it was almost cold in that vast hall; for the walls were so thick that the embrasures of the windows were six or eight feet in depth.

Impatient to visit the house, I extended my arm to Gontran, and said to him,

"Come, dearest husband, come quick; I am impatient to see everything here again, although I remember nothing of it. You have no idea how my heart flutters at the thought of running over all these spots once inhabited by my mother; and then I must do the honours to you. Oh! I am so proud, so happy to have you here. Oh!" added I, with a smile, "I am the chatelaine of the castle, and intend to overpower you with most despotic love."

Instead of sharing my mirth, Gontran replied with a constrained manner—forcing a smile, and looking about him with a disappointed air:

"Between ourselves, noble chatelaine, it seems to me that your demesne is somewhat dilapidated, if all the apartments resemble this. It is a pity that our late engagements have hindered me from thinking of sending an architect hither. Not to find fault with you, dearest wife, since you have had nothing else to do, you really ought to have thought of this. You surely knew the deplorable state of the castle."

My husband had, at first, smiled faintly, but he concluded by speaking to me almost sharply. I looked at him in mingled sorrow and surprise, and said to him softly,

"But, my dear husband, you must remember, that I was as much agitated as you were by all these griefs and afflictions. It was not wilful neglect: then, you know, I have been very sick; so that it was impossible for me to attend to these matters. I fancied that——"

"My God! I am not reproaching you," Gontran interrupted me, angrily. "My dear wife, I am only regretting that we have not made the improvements which are indispensable to render the house habitable. Now we cannot repair the evil; thanks to this cursed revolution, there is no possibility of travelling, no going to the watering-places. In fifteen days, likely enough, Europe will be on fire. Paris must be intolerable: we must submit, therefore, to remain here, and that is why I regret so much to find the place in such bad order."

"It is for you, especially, that I am grieved, my dear," I answered, "at this want of comfort. As for me, I am so happy to have you here with me, that I shall always feel well, under any circumstances."

"You are a thousand times the best of creatures, dear. I, also, am charmed to share this peaceful solitude with you. I comprehend all your reasons for liking it. But after all, that is no reason for dispensing with carpets, or with Persian blinds; for I do not see one at any of the windows, and this castle is just like a lantern."

"I am truly sorry, dear; but, believe me, we shall easily find means of repairing all this, by sending for workmen to Vendome. I will take the charge of overlooking and hurrying the works, and thus indulge a sort of self-love. I am determined, that Maran shall be the most delightful residence to you in all the world—only, you must have a little patience with my efforts!

"Workmen!" he cried hastily; "that is all that is wanting to complete the picture! there is nothing on earth so detestable as workmen—and yet one must submit to it. Well! well! it will be sweetly agreeable—a pleasant occupation I shall have of it!"

"Gontran," I replied, somewhat saddened by this whim of my husband's, "perhaps we are exaggerating the dilapidation of the place. We have only seen this one gallery."

"Heaven! and cannot one judge certainly by this pattern? This is the great hall of honour—the reception-room! You see at a glance, that the steward has accumulated all the splendours of the mansion here;" and he began to laugh with a forced expression. "But come, my dear, do you respect your castle, and try to make the most of it, by aid of your workmen, since we must submit to be bored by them. As for me, I am going to the stables. I would lay my life, they are perfect market houses, without stalls, without loop-boxes—and I, who have just imported a dozen English horses—it will be charmingly pleasant this! I cannot conceive what your man of business can have been about, suffering the house to fall into such a state of dilapidation."

"I am afflicted beyond measure, my dear Gontran; but do not be vexed—only give your orders, and I will have them executed as well as possible."

My resignation certainly touched M. de Lancry. He regretted his impatience, and said kindly, "Once more, dearest, I do not accuse you; what have you to do with it? Only if the stables are bad, it will not be very agreeable, since for five or six mortal months, which we have got to pass here, I shall have no one pleasure but my horses and my hunting. By the bye, are we very far from Vendome?"

"About six or eight leauges, I believe, my dear."

"Better and better; that will be exceedingly convenient as to our eatables; we shall have no fresh sea-fish. Nothing more is wanting to show that our table will be miserable. I cannot conceive, for my part, how your family could contrive to live here!"

"My father never did live much at Maran. My mother only passed some time here, and you know we women content ourselves with moderation."

"Perfectly at liberty you are, dearest, to feed on thin air and the ideal—as for me, I assure you that, in the country, I become very actual and material. I ask a thousand pardons of your romantic exaltation; but when one has no other pleasure than the table, one is allowed, I hope, to wish that it should be good. You will, therefore, oblige me very much by ordering your *maitre d'hotel* to take care that we be provisioned as well as possible. I will have, if it is necessary, a wagon, and a pair of stout working-horses, to go and market for us, at Vendome; for I, who do not live upon abstractions, look naturally somewhat to the solids! and now, I am going to the stables."

And with these words, Gontran departed. Such was our first conversation at my chateau of Maran.

CHAPTER XXVI.

LIFE AT THE CASTLE.

Some time after our arrival at Maran, I began to feel myself weak, suffering and languid. For an hour at a time, I was sometimes overpowered by an incomprehensible uneasiness.

I very soon discovered, that I had made a sad mistake in fancying that Gontran would ever again become to me what he had been during the first months of our marriage. On the contrary, his character appeared to grow harsher by the effects of solitude. Nevertheless, the life which he seemed to lead for himself alone, appeared to please him.

Often when he was alone with me, he was pensive and abstracted—at these times I was sure he was thinking of Ursula; and again, I sometimes fancied that he was regretting the grief his indifference caused me. If I interrupted him in the middle of his meditations, he answered me with bitterness, or rose and went away without uttering a word, as if I had disturbed him in the middle of some sweet and cherished revery.

What sometimes gave me a gleam of hope, even amid these trials, was the suddenness of the change in my husband's manner toward me. A gradual and growing coldness would have seemed natural enough, and therefore would have alarmed me more seriously.

It was a fatal day, on which I came to the conviction that Gontran was in love with me no longer—from that time forth, he no longer thought it necessary to use before me, even those decorums of society, and that respect for appearances, which every man owes to every woman, *even* to his own wife.

Henceforth no more sweet attentions! No more outpourings of the heart! No more—that proved the least desire or anxiety to please me. Some few words on Gontran's new style of life, are here necessary.

Since our establishment at Maran, he had sent for horses and a pack of hounds, to England. He had hired one of the state-forests, which adjoined our property, in which he hunted three days of the week, and shot the other three. He rested himself on Sundays; that was the only day he passed with me. Regularly he set out, immediately after breakfast, and I did not see him again till he returned from hunting in the evening. We sat down to table, at which he sat long, spoke little, and drank deep—often too deeply to preserve his reason. Must I confess it—he was often obliged to his people for assistance, in order to reach his chamber, which adjoined mine.

Hitherto, my husband had always been remarkable for the extreme taste and elegance of his attire. Now, that he was alone with me, he neglected himself, as if purposely. He lived only for hunting and the pleasures of the table. Oh! shame! oh! profanation! As for me, I was no longer anything but one of the conditions, by means of which he was enabled to lead his coarse and sensual existence. For a long time I endured this neglect in silence—this change in his manners which had heretofore been perfection. But now this solitary life, to which I had looked forward so hopefully, was passing away, dim, discoloured, and forlorn. According to my wont, I concealed and controlled my griefs till they overflowed all restraint. The day came, when I could bear no longer. I resolved to speak out—to speak openly to Gontran.

It was on Saturday. It had blown violently all that day; and, unquestionably, Gontran's sport had been bad, for his yeomen prickers did not sound their accustomed flourish for the return from the chase. I knew, from experience, that on such days my husband was always out of humour. I went half-fearfully to meet him, when I heard the clang of his great jack-boots and spurs, on the paved staircase.

"Your sport has been bad to-day, dear, I am afraid," said I.

"Yes! I am bored to death!" he answered; and as he spoke he entered my little chamber, in which I was fond of sitting, because it had been my mother's. M. de Lancry cast himself down upon a sofa, without saying a a word more to me, looking ill-tempered and care-worn. When I looked at him thus, with his dress covered with mud, his beard unshaved, his hair escaping in disorder from his hunting-cap, which he still wore on his head, I could, indeed, hardly recognize him, who, to that time, had been a model of neatness and good taste.

"Ring the bell, dear—and let them give us dinner as soon as possible; I am extremely hungry," said Gontran; and, turning himself over on the sofa, he drew a little chair, worked in tapestry, toward him with the point of his booted foot; and then stretched out his legs upon it, covered with mud, as they were.

"Ah!" said I, running up to him, "mercy for that chair—it was embroidered by my mother. Pray take another foot-stool, I implore you."

Gontran shrugged up his shoulders, moved to another seat, and said:

"Heavens! how strange you are with your fantastic affectations. I would just ask you how it could affect the memory of your mother, my putting my foot on that stool or not?"

"I am astonished, husband, that you cannot comprehend the worship of the past—it is often our only consolation in the present!"

"Oh! if you are going to begin with your metaphysics—your sentiment, I have done. The life which I lead, is not much adapted to developing the intellect!"

"In truth, Gontran, for some time past, I think that you have been acting more coldly tha[illegible]u are yourself aware!"

"God be praised for it, then! I have always had dreams of some months to be spent in a life, purely animal—in which *the beast*, as they say, should take the preeminence. Well—that sort of life I am now leading, and it suits me to perfection. There is not a single superfluity, even to those of the toilette, which I have not laid aside. I was a real Sybarite, and to-day I am a genuine Spartan: a bear, a savage. Upon my word, I find it very convenient to remain thus in the green—to remain dormant, like a chrysalis, until the moment when the fancy shall take me, of transforming myself anew into a gaudy butterfly. But, sing if you please. I want to tell Hébert—he was our maitre d'hotel—to put a bottle of Rhine wine into ice for me. It is a whim. I have not drank any old Rhine wine for a long time—and this which you have here is excellent; it is Johannisberg, yellow as amber. Where did your father get this wine?"

"I think, my dear, I have heard Mademoiselle de Maran say that the Emperor of Austria made him a present of it, when he was ambassador at Vienna?"

"Upon my word! your father did well to forget it here—for it is perfect."

I rang the bell—my husband gave his orders, then yawned, and said to me:

"Play me now the overture to *the Siege of Corinth*, while dinner is getting ready!"

I looked at Gontran sadly. Did he not then remember that this was the opera, during the performance of which, I had been for the first time in his company, in the Gentlemen of the Bedchamber's box? If he had not forgotten the circumstance, his request was a bitter mockery. The tears came into my eyes, and I said mournfully:

"Pardon me, dearest, I could not to-night play *that* piece!"

"Why not? because I ask you to do so? Come then, do as you will: play me something else. I ask you to do this, to kill the time till dinner comes."

"To kill the time, Gontran—does it then hang on you so heavily?"

"On me? by no means. I kill him without having the least grudge in the world against him. I had no idea before, of this excellent monotonous life of the country gentleman. I do not know how long it will continue to amuse me—but so far, I find it exquisitely pleasant. Hunting has become a real rage with me. My huntsman is unrivalled. With his assistance, out of ten runs, I kill eight times. I have a splendid shot, in my game-keeper. Thomas is a perfect cook. Thanks to some improvements we have now made—the stables are now very tolerable. We are quite established in this old chateau—you are as pretty as an angel. Why then should time sit heavily on my hands?"

My husband spoke to me with so much sincerity, with so much ease—he seemed to think his conduct so natural and simple, that he did not even suspect the pain he was giving me. This greatly softened down the bitterness of my reproachful feelings.

I looked steadily at Gontran. I said to him, with emotion—"And I, Gontran—do you think that I am happy?"

Half-stretched upon the sofa, he answered carelessly, tapping his boot with the end of his whip—

"You! I believe you, on my word, to be very happy—as happy as you can be with your little devilish character—what should ail you?"

"Nothing—oh! nothing!—you are quite right, Gontran. I see you in the morning at breakfast time—then in the evening at dinner time, and sometimes for an hour or two on Sundays, when you want me to copy out your hunting-book fairly."

"Well! what would you wish more? must I be continually hung to your side? Believe me, these eternal *tête-a-têtes* are the dullest things in the world."

"I asked you dear, to let me ride with you sometimes—to go out hunting with you."

"Bah! bah! you are too timid, my dear. Besides, there is nothing in the world more in the way than a woman in a hunting field. She takes no pleasure herself, and hinders others. If I had even any one to whose care I could trust you, that would be a different thing—but we have not a sociable neighbour; and besides, you are so wild a little hermit that you will see no one."

"It would be a great pleasure to me, dear husband, to ride with you quite alone.

"But, as I tell you, it is quite impossible. You are too fantastic, Matilda, and always wishing for impossibilities."

"Very well; we will say no more about it. I *am* the most timid woman in the world—and—oh! yes—I am very happy!" and I raised my handkerchief to my eyes. Gontran had thought the reasons he had given me perfectly natural, and not the least wounding to my feelings; and now he appeared at least as much surprised as vexed, at seeing that I shed tears.

"How, then!" he said impatiently, "what it it now? We were talking quite quietly, and all of a sudden you begin crying—in Heaven's name, for what? Are you going to make a scene?"

"A scene? no, Gontran—no! I have nothing to say against you, since you do not perceive the difference between our residence at Maran, and the life we used to live at Chantilly."

"Ah! there it is again—Chantilly! Chantilly again! always Chantilly!

You have no word but that in your mouth, when you wish to reproach me. But do you know that by dint of this you will make me sick even of the recollection of that *charming honeymoon?*" and he began to laugh at his jest. "What would you have, my dear? *That honeymoon lasted as long as honeymoons ever last.* The rythm is not preserved in the phrase—but the sense is—which is quite as good."

"Oh! Gontran! do not blaspheme the happy recollections, which alone remain to me."

"Well, then, do not always repeat the same thing to me; or I will take this mode of punishing you. Come, let us reason like good friends. Do you suppose I married, to pass my whole life at your feet, murmuring and cooing sweet nonsense? You are never content. If we live in the world, you are jealous; if we live alone, your requirements are endless. This becomes tiresome in the long run," he cried, unable to contain himself any longer.

"Gontran, you have no pity! You forget how much I have already suffered; that I have a right to be a little humoured."

"Oh! my good God! what a character! What, more recriminations? Come, let us look at it frankly. You have suffered much, have you? If it is concerning Lugarto, that you tell me this, you are in the wrong."

"I in the wrong?"

"Certainly! I can only repeat to you, what I have told you before on the subject. If you had a shadow of tact, or of address, by means of a few affected rights over him, you would easily have got rid of him without compromising yourself."

"Without compromising myself! Good Heaven! was it my fault?"

"Never mind that. Whether it was your fault or not, you have compromised yourself; and it is on me, sooner or later, that the ridicule must fall."

"I shall be despised: I!——"

"Well, madam, I would rather that it should be on my side, than on yours. Perhaps you think it will be very pleasant to me, when we return to Paris, to be pointed at, as an *injured husband!* But in truth, you must be mad—stark, staring mad—to raise such discussions. Come! let us cut it short. You will make me say something cutting to you—you will burst into reproaches, into sobs. Now, for my part, I would have you dine in peace, and myself likewise."

"What you say to me," I replied, after a moment's pause of astonishment, "is horrible! It is I, whom you accuse—I, the poor victim of that base man's calumnies! See, Gontran, I know not what may be my future lot, but for this evening I will not burst into tears or sobs. You shall dine in peace. I have wept so much already, that the source of my tears is dried up. Misfortune gives me judgment. I will make you no reproaches—I will only let you know that I endure—that I submit—but am not insensible to your indifference."

"Speak then—speak out!" said M. de Lancry, springing to his feet, and walking violently to and fro with great strides. "I have done everything in my power to turn this into a joke, but I cannot escape a *scene!* I have had bad sport this morning; the end of the day is to agree, I see, with its beginning. Come, speak! Let us have an end of it. You know that my sole desire is to live in peace and to see you happy."

"I thank you, Gontran, for being so good as to hear me. Well! it is agony to me to perceive that since we have come hither, you have never had a kind word for me—never a word coming from the heart—but that you live with me, as if I did not exist at all."

"But, in the name of Heaven! what does this jargon signify? What do you wish me to say to you? If you are so fnd of hearing gallant speeches, inspire me with the feelings that give rise to them."

"You are right; it is long that I have discovered this sad truth: we deserve nothing but that which we inspire. In spite of your harshness, I love you yet; therefore you deserve my love.

"Be reasonable, then," said Gontran, in a passion, "since neither you nor I have the power to change realities;" and then he added, "really, Matilda, your romantic, sentimental character, will render you the most miserable of women. Do be reasonable. I have told you, a thousand times, that people do not marry to conjugate the verb *I love you,* for ever, and through all the tenses: but to have a house—a domestic home—a steady, settled mode of life. People marry, to live without formality or restraint with their wives, as long as it suits them to be at home. It is quite clear, that if the end of marriage were perpetual courtship, it would be better to remain always single."

"Ah! Gontran, Gontran, what a waking!"

"You will be obliged to me, one day or other, for setting you right as to those mawkish whimsies. It is necessary to know how to be strict sometimes—it is our duty—our *male* duty—ours, who are called to become one day the heads of families! It is for us to speak the language of reason—and speak it I will! Ah, first of all, I am resolute—resolute—not to leave you one of these mad illusions! Once broken—destroyed thoroughly—you will see how admirably you will accommodate yourself to the realities of life, which will remain to you."

"That is true, Gontran; once all my illusions overthrown and uprooted, I shall accommodate myself to the realities of life, which will remain to me. Just as you say—only it will be for *ever!*"

"Now for it! Threats of death, now! How extremely gay! How charming a style of conversation! And, after this, you complain of my thinking you mawkish? I return from hunting; instead of finding you agreeable, smiling, happy, I see you sad and gloomy. Confess, at least, it is not exactly the way to make me do the amiable!"

"It is true, my soul is full of despair. I cannot conceal it from you any longer," I replied, bitterly; for the tone of irony and scornful raillery which Gontran had adopted, wounded me yet deeper than his harshness. "There can be nothing, I conceive, more irritating than to see tears flow—particularly when we know that we have caused them; but it is not my fault. I can no longer, as I did, smile at every wound that pierces me."

"Be it so, then! I will resign myself to see you always in tears. What would you have me do? Can I prevent you from choosing to consider yourself the most wretched of women?"

"Gontran, be just! My God! let us see? What is my life? what are you to me? or, rather, what am I to you? 'Good morning and good night!—my sport has been good, or has been bad—play me an air upon your piano—have letters written to our tenants who are in arrears!' This is the whole of my life, Gontran. This is my life; and do you expect me to make you gay—to be merry—joyful? Is it possible? Alas! it was your goodnes, your love, your affection, which made me gay of old!"

"At last here comes the dinner," said Gontran, hearing the bell; "I had much rather go to table than answer you; for you will end by putting me in a passion, and I should be sorry for that. Arguing with you is like jousting against windmills."

The servant announced that dinner was upon the table.

"Are you coming?" said Gontran.

"Excuse me, dear; I have no appetite, and do not feel well at all!"

"That is very pleasant; and moreover, looks extremely well before your servants. But just as you think best, my dear wife." And he went out to sit down alone to dinner.

After the departure of my husband, I retired to my own room, and began to cry bitterly. Everything that I had tried had failed to move him. It was too certain. He did not even suspect the amount of my sufferings—caused by his own neglect. My complaints he attributed to an absurd, romantic sentimentalism. All hope of bringing him to compassionate my sorrows was now lost to me! In spite of his selfishness, his entire devotion to his own pleasures, he would not have been absolutely insensible to my complaints, had he been able to comprehend them. *If I have ceased to address you with the same tender sentiments as of old, it is that you no longer inspire me with them.* Such, in fact, had been the purport of his answer to me.

It was one of those overwhelming discoveries which build up, as it were, a wall of brass between us and the possibility of hope. In my affliction, I knew not how to answer him. Alas! I was scarcely eighteen, and before me I had a life—a whole long life.

And now, I said to myself, perhaps I am but on the threshold of my sorrows. I could already draw comparisons. I remembered the agonies of jealousy; perhaps I was wrong to complain. The mournful, cold existence which passed at Maran had at least no negatives against which to contend. I had not, at least, to regret happiness which I saw, but could not enjoy. Perhaps I was yet to count those sad days as the bright spots amid sadder yet to come. I returned then into the depths of my own heart—I asked myself if, in uence of all those cruel trials, my love toward Gontran had diminished, This my last conversation with him, had wounded me so deeply, that I perceived that I was in a rare fit of frankness toward myself. Alas! I dicovered, with a sort of bitter pleasure, that I loved Gontran as well as ever. I have now some difficulty in comprehending the blind obstinacy of the love which I then felt toward him. It must have sprung from the conviction that Gontran could, *if he chose it*, render me happy. This last hope, to which I clung with all my powers, sufficed to keep alive this fatal love. A mixed feeling of pride and defiance convinced me that I was still capable of inspiring Gontran with that passionate sentiment of adoration, which he had once felt for me; but that I wanted the *skill of the heart*, which is needed to render our powers available.

I thus explained to myself that indomitable love, which in woman survives in spite of the most barbarous disdain. Intoxicating recollections tell us that happiness is there, still *there*, in a word, in a smile, in a glance of the man we adore; and we cannot believe that he will not soon—will not perhaps to-morrow—cast upon us that word, that glance, that smile, on which our very lives appear to hang.

Where love attains to that pitch of feverish excitement—of desperate obstinacy, it seems to me that it possesses all the characteristics of the rage for gambling, which I have heard described and analyzed by gamblers. A former gain gives yet a blind assurance of the future. In your own despite your hope increases, every time it is foiled and deceived; every step taken on that burning, agonizing path, seems to put you almost within grasp of that unattainable goal, which you aspire in vain to reach. The more your losses multiply, the more, you say to yourself, do your chances increase likewise of coming off the winner.

"*Luck will be weary*," the gambler replies, rakes up his last stake—the gulf of chance devours it—all is lost!

"*He will grow weary of neglecting me*," says the fond doating woman; redoubles her devotion, lavishes her last proofs of affection, her last stakes of love—and as the gambler dashes himself to atoms against a blind and stupid chance—so does she dash herself against a dull and apathetical indifference.

Then she has no more left—no more! her heart is void—she has wasted all her powers of loving—there only remains to her, as to the spendthrift, an everlasting regret for the rich treasures so ingloriously and rashly lavished.

I had not yet gone so far—even while I accused, I still loved Gontran. Sometimes, I fancied that he was engaged by thoughts of Ursula; and then I believe that jealousy increased as it were the transports of my love, instead of cooling them. Jealousy sets the most powerful feeling into action—self-love—pride—fear—and hope. Love, above all, is kept alive by agitation.

Jealousy does not diminish, but augments rather the force of passion. The more generally he whom you love attracts and fascinates—the more vehemently the possession of his love is disputed with you, the greater does his value seem in your eyes.

I thought that I would make one last trial, and see to what extent I was still in love with Gontran. Several times, when I had thought of the devotedness of M. de Mortagne, I thought likewise of M. de Rochegune, and his fervent affection. The very calmness with which I could turn to those recollections, proved that there could be nothing guilty in them.

I felt for M. de Rochegune, admiration, respect, sincere gratitude; a sentiment akin to that with which M. de Mortagne inspired me—a sentiment full of sweetness and tranquillity. Although his features were not perfectly regular, I saw in them an expression full of dignified nobleness. When I thought of the interest which he took in me, long unknown, of which he had given me so many proofs—when I recollected all the great and good actions he had performed—when I reflected on the compassionate kindness, which in him was united to a chivalrous courage, to an ardent daring character—I perceived that M. de Rochegune possessed a combination of all the rare qualities which should inspire the most lively passion.

And yet, far from regretting that I could not marry him, I felt, even at that hour, that could I have chosen between him and Gontran—my heart's choice would ever have been with Gontran.

Alas! this confession costs me dear! It must be a symptom of a bad heart.

In the eyes of equity and reason there was no comparison to be drawn between Gontran and M. de Rochegune, so far as concerned actual good qualities, or even as to the position which each occupied in the world.

I did not deceive myself. Gontran was charming to young men, and to women more especially—for his grace, his wit, his gaiety. But men staked their judgment on M. de Rochegune. He commanded that deference—that weighty consideration, which is never accorded but to men of high position, or yet higher character. I do not speak of his illustrious birth, nor of his brilliant fortune; although these magnificent advantages, united to the others which he possessed, gave yet more weight to the place which he occupied in the world.

Yet! and yet, to my shame, I repeat it! Gontran lost nothing by this comparison. Yes! to my shame! I say it—because I believe that an unworthy love is a proof of an evil, or perverted nature.

Those passions which we are obliged to excuse, by the admission *that passion is blind*, are almost always passions disgracefully misplaced. And by persisting in my adoration of a man, from whom I was receiving scorn and insult, I feel that I was guilty of entertaining a love, which was in itself degrading.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A WORK OF CHARITY.

THE meditations into which I fell, after that melancholy conversation with my husband, were not fruitless. I thought that, perhaps the want of a real serious occupation rendered me too susceptible, too liable to violent passions.

I gave up—I confess it with tears of bitter grief—the convinction I had hitherto entertained, that my love could be the sole and constant occupation of my life. Very soon I went farther, and according to my custom of accusing myself, to excuse Gontran, reproached myself, with having given up my whole life to this affection; and persuaded myself that God was punishing me for the exclusiveness of my idolatry.

As soon as this idea struck me, I thought that I was saved. The past appeared to me in a new light. I comprehended easily how the romantic exaggeration of my feelings must naturally have disgusted Gontran. I comprehended, that a woman could have other duties on earth than loving, or in other words, burning with passion for one adored being. The deathless love which exists in the heart, ought at least to cast its reflection over all those who suffer; love—like our religious sentiment toward the One and Eternal Being who created the universe—should manifest itself by our benevolence, and pity toward mankind at large.

The day on which this thought struck me, kindled me, as it were, with a heavenly revelation—I waited with impatience for the return of Gontran. I doubt not that my countenance betrayed my joy, my hopes, for when he saw me, he said—"Heavens! how joyful you look to-day!"

"Yes! my husband, I have made to-day a precious discovery."

"Ah! what is that?"

"I have discovered, that you were quite right in scolding me, and that I was quite wrong, as you reproached me with being—in a word, that my love was *misemployed*. I have discovered, in short, that it was not enough for me to say to you, 'Gontran I am worthy of you,' but that I ought to have proved it, otherwise than by daily protestations."

"What do you mean to say, Matilda?"

"Yes! my everlasting complaints must have wearied you. I will complain no more, and henceforth you shall no more find me dull or cross when you return home; but on the contrary, you shall always find me, as now, smiling and happy."

"So much the better—a thousand times the better! For what reason shall you be so much changed?"

"Oh! I have great projects."

"Great projects! which will make you happy and smiling? Quick! then tell me, quick, what they are?"

"You know the little chateau?" (This was rather a large house, which was attached to the chateau de Maran, and which joined the offices. In the time of my grandfather, it had been used to lodge the supernumerary guests, for whom there was not room in the castle.) "You know the little chateau?" I said to Gontran.

"To be sure—well?"

"It is utterly useless to us."

"How! useless? My kennel is in it—my harness-rooms, and the apartments of my hunting-train."

"When you know the purpose for which I destine the little chateau," said I, smiling, I am sure that you will agree with me, that your kennel, your harness-room, and your hunting-train, can be just as well accommodated in the offices, part of which are unoccupied."

Monsieur de Lancry stared at me in great surprise. "How!" he said—"do you want to turn my people out of the little chateau? You must be joking!"

"No, really—I assure you——"

"Come—come, don't talk any more about that, my dear little wife. It is impossible for me to put my kennel anywhere but in the little chateau; the old garden connected with it is inclosed, and is a capital walk for the young hounds, and the breeding establishment. The old kennel is very damp, and has but a small dark court. You see, then, that it would be impossible to make any change."

"Do you know, dearest, I am almost glad that you set so much store on the little chateau, as a part of your amusements? Your share in the charity which I meditate, will be greater than mine; for you will have made a little sacrifice, while I shall only do myself a pleasure."

My husband seemed excessively surprised.

"A charity—a sacrifice! Come, dearest, do not talk in riddles. What is all this about?"

"It is all about an excellent idea which has struck me, and for which, in a few minutes, you will thank me. I want to found in the little chateau, a school for little girls on the ground-floor; and on the floor above, I will have some beds arranged for poor sick women. Three or four good sisters of charity will be enough to manage our little establishment, which shall be subject to my supreme inspection, and which will procure for us the blessings of all the poor in the country. I will teach their lessons myself to the children; and they shall have one-half of the garden to play in: the other half shall be given up to the poor convalescent women. Now, will you tell me that your dogs will not do very well in the offices?"

Monsieur de Lancry burst into a roar of laughter, which disconcerted me a little; and then cried out, interrupting himself again to burst out laughing—

"I think, in truth, that this is a very original idea; such a one, in short, as no one but yourself would have ever entertained!"

"How?"

"And can you really, in sober earnest, suppose that I could be pestered here with a heap of little beggar children, and have my head split with their peevish squalling, and my eyes shocked by the sight of a scum of old decrepid women?"

"But, dearest husband, the little chateau is so far off, that you could neither see nor hear."

"Hush! hush! you are a spoiled child, a little goose," said my husband, with an air of cold-blooded mockery, which shocked me. "Do not let us talk any more of such childish nonsense. Is it possible, that for the love of playing school-mistress, and lady bountiful, you can think of disarranging my hounds, and my people, who are so well accommodated there?"

"But, husband——"

"Tell me, my dear little fanciful, how could such strange whims have got into your little head? Tell me this, frankly."

"Dear Gontran!" I replied, feeling the tears rising to my eyes, for I little dreamed of such a reception, or of such sneers. "I will tell you how it came into my head. I was thinking that you were quite right, that I ought to have something else to do, than to be always talking of my tenderness for you. I perceived that it was almost impious to think of nothing but my love for you, and that without loving you less, I ought to do all the good that was in my power. I have thought, moreover, that it would be a means of proving my affection to you, for it is the desire of being worthy of you, that inspired me with the idea. That is the way, Gontran, that the idea came into my head."

"Doubtless, the end is very praiseworthy, my dear; and I can readily understand, that you may want occupation here. But, I confess to you, there are many other modes of amusement which I should prefer to that you have chosen, although I am to derive a share of the profit from these charities, to a partnership in which you associate me so generously. Between ourselves, I am your very humble servant, for your philanthropical intentions: but I will choose another way hereafter of attending to my soul's good."

"But, my dear husband——"

"Really, Matilda, I must beg you to talk no more about it. If I did not know your character, I should suppose you were joking."

"I am speaking quite seriously, Gontran; and it is seriously, that I implore you to grant my request."

"Seriously, Matilda, are you making fun of me?"

"Gontran! what language! what a manner of receiving my prayer! and for what? because I beg you to take part with me, in a good and useful charity?"

Gontran shrugged his shoulders, impatiently, and answered very shortly—"I have done all that is in my power, to look upon this as an imaginative jest: but, since you insist upon my speaking plainly out, I will tell you, for the last time, that what you ask me is impossible. Do you understand me? completely, and absolutely impossible. I hope I speak clearly enough, and that you will avoid even mentioning the subject to me again."

For the first time in my life, I rebelled against the will of M. de Lancry, and answered him very firmly: "I regret very much, that I cannot agree with you on this subject, my dear—but my project is practicable—I am very anxious that it shall be executed, and *it shall!*"

My husband looked at me with an expression rather of surprise than anger, and replied, smiling, ironically:

"Pray tell me—I am the master here, am I not?"

"Certainly; you are the master. I do not dispute your tastes; for pity's sake, grant me the same liberty with mine!"

"Stuff! How can you go on so? Give you the liberty, indeed, of making ducks and drakes of ten or twelve thousand francs a year, and more too! For you can have no notion into what expenses your fine mania for charity, which you have taken up all on a sudden, will ruin you. But, really, I am a fool to answer you at all!"

"If it is the question of money, which displeases you, my dear, do not consider that; I will economize it out of the monthly allowance you make me."

"But I do not choose that, at all, my dear. I choose that you should be dressed with that elegance which befits our fortune and position in society. Can you suppose that, to give you the pleasure of teaching their A, B, C, to beggar children, and of giving physic to old women, I would allow you to be dressed with absurd meanness? Come, now, my dear Matilda, I wish that people should speak of Madame de Lancry, as one of the most charming women in all Paris."

There was so much selfishness—so much harshness—in the objections which my husband made to my scheme, and so little sympathy with the pious and noble sentiment to which I was obedient, that I was angry.

For the first time, moreover, I thought that, after all, I was in my own house—in the house of my fathers—and that, without injustice, I might well dispense in charity a very small part of that fortune which my husband was lavishing in all kinds of profusion. After a long silence, then, I replied again to M. de Lancry—

"You will excuse me, that I cannot share your opinions, on the subject of this school, and ——"

Gontran stamped his foot passionately on the ground, and without suffering me to proceed, cried out,

"What! again? What! when I have told you so plainly what I think! So, so! you have decided, then—perhaps sworn—to put me beside myself! Did you not hear me? I tell you that I will not have it—that I will not! How many times must I repeat it?"

I could restrain myself no longer, but cried out, in my turn, "And, as for me, I will!"

"You will! This is something new! God forgive me—you say that *you will!* I believe!"

"Yes! for I am getting tired of suffering, and submitting myself in this manner. This language *is* new. It surprises you, Gontran; I understand that, readily. But, this time, I will not yield. What I ask, is just, is reasonable, and I will obtain it!"

"Ah! ah! you will—you will, aye?—And pray, how? if you please,—let us see by what means? To whom will you apply, to make me do what I do not choose? Come, answer me. Before coming to extremities—to threats, you have no doubt, assured yourself of the means of arriving at your ends. Once more, answer me!"

I was panic-stricken. I could not find one word to reply to my husband.

In the first place, a struggle with my husband, not only frightened me, but seemed impossible to me. My instinct told me, moreover, that law and custom, were with M. de Lancry, and against me.

Before giving up this last hope, I resolved to make one more effort, addressing myself to the heart, to the generosity of Gontran ;

"Doubtless, I cannot *force* you to do what I desire, my dear. But I can ask it of you as a favour. Do not misinterpret the words which I am going to address to you, but your refusal obliges me to speak to you thus." And then I added, trembling, I confess it, and blushing with shame : "This house belonged to my father, and——"

"If this be an indirect method of apprising me, that the greater part of the fortune we enjoy, came from your side," replied Gontran, with imperturbable gravity and coolness, "the observation is very delicate, and in good taste, doubtless. But it has no effect upon me. I have expected it for a long time. It is the eternal chorus of women, whenever a prudent or firm husband opposes their fancies. Well, madam, whether this house did or did not belong to your father—whether the fortune we enjoy did or did not come from your side—matters little. Once for all ! remember that we are married—so that you have given me the sole power—so that to me alone—do you understand ? to me alone belongs the employment and management of this property. I alone authorize the expenditures that you may wish to make. I ask you twenty thousand pardons, for entering into these domestic details ; but I hope that this will be understood, once for all. It will save you the unpleasant feeling of asking for impossibilities, and me that of refusing them. In truth, if some one did not see to it, you would make a hasty end of your fortunes. Six months ago ! it was a hut at Chantilly you wanted to buy, because, forsooth, we had passed a few happy days there."

"Ah, Gontran !" I exclaimed, no longer able to refrain from weeping, "mercy ! this is too cruel—you are pitiless ! At least, formerly, your coldness succeeded to moments of kindness and affection. But now, nothing—nothing ! not so much even as one word of consolation. Alas ! I understand it but too well. Formerly you were unhappy—the fear of the future made you restless—you too knew what grief was, and that made you compassionate."

"Reproaches !—ever reproaches !" exclaimed Gontran, raising his eyes to heaven.

His voice appeared less menacing. I hoped that at last I had moved him.

"Gontran," I said, "perhaps my reproaches are too bitter--nevertheless be just, reflect. Setting aside those days of fleeting bliss, say—say, have I not been a most unhappy woman ? Think of my childhood—of my youth passed in sorrow and constraint, I ask but one thing of you ; forget what I am to you, look on me only as a stranger, and say—say if you can—that I do not deserve some pity !"

And I fell back into an arm-chair, covering my face with my hands, and unable to say one word more.

"Come, come--be calm !" said M. de Lancry, drawing near, and sitting down beside me.

"You are a little goose—with a character full of such exalted and romantic notions, that you exaggerate everything into the blackest light. Because for your own interest I refuse to sanction your fantastic projects—generous, if you will, but impossible—you get angry—you put everything in the worst light."

"Heaven ! if you could only know by what train of thoughts I came to the desire of founding this charity," said I to Gontran, you would easily understand my insisting."

"I understand all, my dear wife ; but come, let us talk sense. You are going to lay out a great deal of money in founding your school, and almshouse. It is a noble and pious occupation, which you wish to make for yourself—but is it wise—is it even truly charitable to accustom the poor to the enjoyment of comforts which may be so short-lived ?"

"I assure you, dearest, I should never grow weary of doing good."

"There are, however, a thousand circumstances under which it might become impossible for to do what you desire. For example, it would not be very wonderful, if I were to sell this estate one day or other.'

"Sell this estate ! my God ! and wherefore ?"

"It is worth above a million, and does not bring me above twenty thousand livres a year, clear of taxes and repairs—the house is inconvenient—the land scattered—and in a word, it is a very dull residence. By selling

Maran, and placing the money in the stocks, or in the bank of France, it would give us fifty thousand livres, instead of the twenty it now brings us!"

"Sell Maran! surely, you would not think of it! It has been so long in our family—my mother lived in it—I——"

"All these chimerical advantages are not worth thirty thousand livres yearly—do you see?"

"But, what do we want with so much money? Can we not live on what we have?"

"Child!" answered Gontran, with an expression of scornful compassion, "you know nothing of business; it is impossible to have too large a revenue, you do not know what a house costs. Besides, I want to receive in Paris this winter with so much splendour, as shall show people that the revolution of July has not crushed us, as they fancy."

But seriously, dear husband, you do not think of selling Maran? I entreat you, for pity! do it not, I am attached to the place."

"For that very reason it is better to sell it at once, before you become more accustomed to it."

"But dearest, I should not wish———"

"Come: we shall begin our quarrels again! listen to reason. How many times must I tell you that the law gives me absolute—do you mark me? *absolute* power over your property. I can buy, sell, and dispose of it as I think good. If I think it for our interest to sell—sell it I shall: and I am so near being convinced of the fact, that I cannot consent to your farming establishments, which might scarcely last six months. This being well understood, I leave you. I must so and see if my pointers have fed well—they have had a hard day's work."

And M. de Lancry left me alone.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

EMMA.

I WAS frightened by what my husband said to me, touching his intention to sell Maran, and to increase his expenditure. I felt that I had no power to resist his will. I remembered the warnings of Madame de Richeville, and M. de Mortagne, relative to the extravagance of M. de Lancry; I trembled to think that our fortune was entirely at his mercy. His refusal to give me what I asked of him, in order to found a charitable asylum, distressed me; but I was not discouraged. Unable to do good upon so large a scale, I resolved to do my best to assist such unfortunate persons as fell in my way, and to seek some distraction from my sorrows in the accomplishment of these pious duties. My poor Blondeau assisted me marvellously; thanks to the information that she gave me, I was able to alleviate much suffering. God rewarded me; in place of being bitter and poignant, my grief became melancholy and contemplative. I experienced a sort of calm, of repose; I consoled myself for the blunt manners or the indifference of my husband, in thinking of the tears of gratitude that some trifling benefits had deserved. I took a pleasure in associating Gontran with these charities. I gave always in his name, and felt a touching emotion, when I heard us united in one common benediction.

Several days passed in this manner. My husband still led the same life, and did not seem aware of the change that had taken place in me. Once only he said to me: "I observe with pleasure that you have given up your follies; you are right: the more I look into the estate, the more I am convinced that I shall do very well in getting rid of it." I had acquired sufficient experience of character of Gontran, to give up any attempt to struggle against his will, when I knew that I had no means to make him change it. I only replied, that he was at liberty to do as he thought fit; but I wrote to M. de Mortagne to inform him of this resolution, and to ask him if I could possibly oppose it. It was about two months since we had quitted Ursula. One morning, after the departure of my husband for the chase, I received by post, a letter from Rouvrai. M. Secherin informed me that in compliance with his promise, Ursula would accompany him very shortly to Maran to pass some time with us. His factory was going on excellently, and his head clerk was quite competent to fill his place during his absence. M. Secherin also said, that he would not leave to Ursula the pleasure of writing to me, and surprising me. A few words from my cousin, added in a postscript, at the foot of the letter, confirmed what her husband had said on that point. Twice I read over this letter, unable to believe my eyes. Nothing, however, could be more natural in appearance; twenty times we had agreed with Ursula, that she should come and pass some time with me; but then I believed her my friend, my sister. I recalled to mind the few words I had overheard during the conversation of Ursula and Gontran, which had excited my jealousy. I trembled to think, that my cousin, while staying with us, would see my husband every day. I persuaded myself, that this journey to Maran was an arrangement concocted with Gontran. My first impulse was to write to Madame Secherin that we were about to quit our estate, and that we could not receive her. But I did not dare to put this determination into practice, without informing my husband of it. I resigned myself to wait his return from the chase. Alas! at these renewals of jealousy, I even looked back with regret to the two months that I had just passed. The cares that had obscured them were as nothing compared to those reserved for me, I doubted not if my cousin should come to Maran.

In the midst of the pre-occupations, I heard all at once the noise of post-horses; a carriage entered the court of the chateau. Thinking that Ursula, to avoid all chance of a refusal on my part, had, perhaps, determined to arrive simultaneously with her letter, I ran to my window. What was my astonishment! I saw Madame de Richeville descend from the carriage, with a young girl whom I did not know! For the first time, the sight of the duchess did me good; it seemed to me, that Heaven had sent me a friend at the moment when one was most necessary. Experience had proved to me, that, in coming before, to warn me of the faults of Gontran, she had wished to render me an important service. I thought that in the difficult position in which the speedy arrival of Ursula would place me, the advice of the friend of M. de Mortagne might be of immense benefit to me. I was about to descend from my room to meet Madame de Richeville, when she entered.

I found her so much changed in the space of about three months, during which I had not seen her, that I was unable to repress a movement of surprise. She perceived, and said to me with her charming smile. "You would be troubled to recognize me, would you not? Oh! I have suffered so much. But, let us talk of yourself—of you," said she, taking my two hands in her own. "Maran was not very much out of my way; I have made a circuit to see you in passing. And M. de Lancry, where is he?" "Out hunting, madam, for the whole day," said I to Madame de Richeville. Without doubt, from my accent, and the look which accompanied my words, the duchess discovered that I joyfully embraced this opportunity of a long conversation with her, and that I had some trying secret to confide to her; she shook her head mournfully, and looked at me with an expression of touching interest. But, remembering that she was not alone, she said, pointing out to me the young person who accompanied her:

"Allow me to present to you Mademoiselle de Lostanges, my relation," added Madame de Richeville, after a moment's hesitation:

I had not yet attentively examined the young girl. I was at once struck with admiration. Although she was scarcely fourteen years of age, she appeared to be sixteen, so erect, and graceful, and supple was her figure. The azure of her large blue eyes was limpid and transparent; her nose was small and straight; her vermillion mouth was of rare perfection; her ivory forehead and her cheeks of a rosy whiteness, were framed by bands of beautiful flaxen hair, slightly waving, and so thick, in spite of its softness, that they formed behind her head an enormous tress several times twisted round. That exquisite face of oval form, slightly elongated, realized the idea of antique beauty. In spite of the extreme youth of Mademoiselle de Lostanges, her features, her expression, her bearing gave an appearance of serious candour, of sweet gravity, and of noble serenity; which was, at the same time, both imposing and charming. Her look, above all, had about it an angelic gentleness which involuntarily brought tears into my eyes.

Alas! alas! poor Emma! my sad forebodings did not deceive me. These beings—so perfectly endowed that one would deem them of an essence superior to our own—have alone those looks which reflect beforehand, so to speak, the celestial joys into the bosom of which they are sometimes too soon carried. God leaves not long his angels among men. Emma! Emma! my friend! Oh! thou, my true sister! thou hearest and thou seest me. Oh! thou who hast passed as a divine and holy apparition into the soul of those who loves thee!

I was so struck with the beauty of Mademoiselle de Lostanges, that, in turning toward Madame de Richeville, I could not refrain myself from saying to her, in a low voice:

"Heavens! how beautiful she is! how beautiful she is!"

Emma heard me. She drooped her long eyelashes; her fresh and youthful visage was tinted by a rosy blush.

"Is she not?" involuntarily replied Madame de Richeville, with an exclamation of radiant pride. Then she looked at me with an unquiet air, her pale and care-worn face crimsoned for a moment. After some seconds of silence, she said to me:

"Your excellent Blondeau—is she here?"

"Yes, certainly."

"Well, will you then be kind enough to ask for her? I would have some talk with you; and, meanwhile, I will confide Emma to her charge, that she may show her your park, which is said to be charming."

I rang, and sent for Blondeau; she shortly took away Mademoiselle de Lostanges, whom Madame de Richeville could not allow to leave her without kissing her on the forehead.

"Ah! poor unhappy child!" cried Madame de Richeville, when we were alone—"I have learnt all; your husband owed money to that infamous Lugarto; he took advantage of M. de Lancry's dependence on himself, to compromise you outrageously; there was a duel, in which the wretch was wounded——"

These words of Madame de Richeville proved to me, that she knew nothing, either of the shameful conduct of Gontran, or of the scenes in the isolated house. I rejoiced in the discretion of M. de Mortagne. It would have been distressing to me to have had to blush for my husband.

"In truth, madam, M. Lugarto has done us all the evil that he could; but, thank God, he is now out of France—and yourself, have not you to complain of him also?"

"He has caused me the profoundest grief that I have felt in all my life."

"Madam, pardon—pardon. The interest that you take in me, has, perhaps, been the cause of his hatred toward you?"

"Why deny it, my poor child? It is true. He knew the warm friendship that bound me to M. de Mortagne, and consequently to yourself. He wished to draw me away, and deprive you thus of a friend at the moment when you most needed one."

"And you have accused me, perchance—me, the involuntary cause of your griefs—"

"No, no, Matilda! alas! I was so miserable, that I have since, on the contrary, reproached myself that you were so little in my thoughts, in the midst of the misfortune that fell upon me—You see it, Matilda: I am but the shadow of myself—so much have I suffered—so much have I wept!"

"I dare not ask you—what has caused this frightful sorrow?"

"Listen, Matilda! May this mark of entire confidence, that I am going to give you, stimulate your own. By your paleness—by your sad and sorrowing smile—I see it, Matilda—you are not happy!"

I was silent; but a tear rolled down my cheek. Madame de Richeville joined her hands together vehemently, lifted her eyes to Heaven, and looked at me, as she shook her head, as if to say, "Alas! did I not anticipate it?" After some moments' silence, she resumed: "There is in you, my poor child, I know not what touching charm, that inspires an excessive confidence. Before your marriage, I made to you a sufficiently painful avowal—in the hope that confession, humiliating as it was to myself, might serve, so to speak, as a guarantee for the counsel and advice that I had given you. What must have happened, has happened, Matilda. Your heart was passionately smitten. You believed me not—you could not believe me. This is no reproach; on the contrary, it is an excuse that I assign for a blindness, in which I have myself participated. In confiding to you what I am about to confide, Matilda, I hope this time to be more happy. You will not hide your troubles from me. I shall be able to serve you."

"Ah! madam! how many times heretofore have I been culpable, cruel, toward you," cried I, moved by the words of Madame de Richeville.

She replied: "Cruel to me!—no; but to yourself, unhappy child. Come, come, do not despair. You see it—it is I, now, who console you, who give you cause for hope."

"Hope!" said I, sighing.

The duchess took, tenderly, my hands within her own. "Yes, hope—my counsels will entitle you to it; but, in order that my counsels should be efficacious, it is necessary that I should know all. I commence. My example will determine you."

"Doubt it not, madam. This moment, when I saw you arrive, I thanked God for having sent me—a friend—may I say it?"

"Yes! oh! yes! Say it—say a mother: for sorrow has indeed made me old, and my heart is more tenderly than ever devoted to you. Listen to me, then. At that morning dance, at the English embassy, Monsieur Lugarto said to me these words: 'Is it long since Mademoiselle Albin went to the village of Bory, in Anjou, to lodge with the farmer, Anselme?' To explain to you how this man had discovered a secret, of the last importance to me, would be altogether impossible. At this unexpected disclosure I stood stupified. Monsieur Lugarto demanded an interview for the next day. I granted it; I was dying to know how far this man was informed of a secret, that, I thought, was well kept. Monsieur Lugarto came. 'You are bringing up a young girl, under the name of Emma de Lostanges,' said he to me. It was true—I turned pale. 'Mademoiselle Albin is charged with her education.' This again was true. 'I know who is the mother—who is the father of this young girl!' added he. Then, after having for an instant enjoyed my dismay, he added, slowly, these last words, with an expression of infernal triumph: 'This young girl has been, for three days, at death's door. At this hour, she, perhaps, lives no longer.' Then he left me, saying: 'I shall always treat, as my bitterest enemies, those who are the friends of Mortagne, of Rochegune, or of Matilda. Now, that I know the mystery about the birth of Emma, you may form some idea of my vengeance, whether she die, or live—which is scarcely probable.' My first cry, on emerging from the sort of annihilation into which this revelation had thrown me, was for horses. I set out for Anjou that very evening. The fiend had not deceived me. Emma was dying."

"Good Heaven! madam!"

Monsieur Lugarto had learned—through Mademoiselle Albin, whom he had gained by bribery—he had learned, I say, the hopeless state of the unfortunate Emma, and had availed himself of that disastrous news to withdraw me from Paris. I might have stood in the way of his perfidious projects upon you; and my presence with Emma might serve as a proof of his denunciations. His treachery had been well calculated. I was weeping at the bedside of the almost expiring Emma; my husband arrived. We had been tacitly separated for several years; the behaviour of Monsieur de Richeville, on this occasion, will give you a knowledge of him. 'This girl is yours,' he said. Alas! seeing this angel descending to the tomb, crushed by despair, and by remorse for a fault which Heaven was punishing with so terrible a chastisement, I dared not—I would not tell a falsehood.

"How!" cried I, interrupting Madame de Richeville—"Emma——"

"Emma—is my daughter!" replied the duchess, casting down her eyes in confusion.

I could not repress a gesture which Madame de Richeville took for a reproach, and she hastened to add—"Oh! condemn me not, before you have heard me. Without doubt I was guilty, deeply guilty—but if you knew—I will tell you all, and you will pity me, I am sure. After this avowal, M. de Richeville said to me, at the bed-side of that expiring child—'I have dissipated all my fortune. There remains of yours, an income of a hundred thousand livres. Give me a million, or otherwise I shall commence a process for separation; I shall publish this horrible scandal; I have all the letters which prove that Mademoiselle de Lostanges is your daughter—that she was born during my journey to Italy. This is not all; I have also, all the letters that you wrote to M. de Lancry!"

"Ah! madam," cried I, with a blush, "it is M. Lugarto alone, who, abusing his influence over my husband, could have forced him to give up those letters."

I doubt it not. I believe M. de Lancry incapable of voluntarily committing so infamous an action. But what shall I say, Matilda? Bewildered—half distracted by grief—terrified by the éclat of a process which would dishonour me—of a process which would give up to the sarcasms of the world, a memory consecrated to my mind—that of the father of Emma!"

"He no longer lives, Madam?"

"No—he has been dead six years," said Madame de Richeville, putting up her hands to her forehead, with painful emotion. She continued—"With so many reasons for shrinking from the scandal threatened by M. de Richeville if I did not execute his wishes, I consented to all. Like a man of forethought," added the duchess, with a bitter smile, "my husband had brought with him one of his men of business; the deeds were prepared. There, by the bed-side of my daughter, I signed away one-half my fortune. In exchange for that grant, the letters of M. de Lancry, and those connected with the birth of Emma, were given up to me. Thanks to Heaven! now my husband is disarmed of the means to injure me."

"Oh! but it was base," cried I, "to impose such conditions by a deathbed!"

"At present, Matilda," said the Duchess de Richeville to me, "I have confessed to you the two only crimes that I have ever committed. They have put upon me many adventures; and, nevertheless, I swear to you, Matilda, before that God, almighty in his goodness, who restored my daughter to me, that I have never deserved all the calumnies which have been heaped upon me! I do not pretend to deny my guilt—it has been great; but—if you knew, that—married at scarcely sixteen, to M. de Richeville, I was, after some months of union, contemptuously, brutally sacrificed—and for such creatures! Oh! my God! During four years, the success that I met with in the world was sufficient to console me for the desertion of my husband. During those four years, intoxicated, or rather stunned, my heart slumbered within me; I loved no one; but I knew not a moment of ennui. By degrees, however, I wearied of these fêtes—of this existence, empty and exciting. My husband had gone to Italy, where he remained two years; I was alone, and at liberty. A profound melancholy seized upon me; for the first time, the pleasures of the world sufficed me no more. What shall I say, Matilda? At that moment, I met in the world the father of Emma. A passion, violent, and long struggled against, made me forgetful of my duties. If a crime may be palliated or absolved by the worth of him who causes its commission, my love was, indeed, excusable. He whom I loved, united in himself qualities and charms the most rare. This passion, profound and mutual, lasted six years, almost unknown to the world; for I passed, on one of my estates, the greater part of my time. Death struck down him, whom I had so dearly loved.

After this frightful blow, I passed several years in strange alternations, sometimes remaining entire months overwhelmed by despair. Sometimes in a desire to combat the grief that devoured me, I gave myself up with ardour to every pleasure; I received with a sort of coquetry—empty, innocent I swear to you, but a thousand times more compromising than many real crimes—I received, I say, all homage, all vows; my heart remained always cold and dead to the emotions of love; and then when these men, whose attentions I had received with so much indifference, fancying themselves beloved, desired some proofs of a serious affection, I scarcely understood their meaning; I seemed to be waking from a dream; and their pretensions made me indignant. Their spite, their hatred at seeing themselves deceived in the hopes which I had unfortunately encouraged, fomented abominable calumnies, of which I was the victim, and to which you have heard Mademoiselle de Maran make such cruel allusions. Then, seeing myself unjustly attacked, and indignant at the wickedness of the world, I sought a refuge in prayer. Unable to do anything without falling into exaggeration, I vowed myself to austerities the most rigorous; I covered myself with hair-cloth; I lived whole months in the most profound solitude. But in vain I asked repose from God; God heard me not. He saw only impiety in my desperate violent prayers, in those impulses of religion and to which I gave myself up by fits; and, as if in atonement for the slanders that my lightness had provoked, after so many struggles, after so many bitter deceptions, I wished to seek a last consolation in love—or rather, I hoped to bring the past to life again, that past which had been so dear to me. Alas! here was my greatest crime. I foolishly believed that one might love twice. Instead of preserving in my heart a remembrance invaluable and sacred, I blasphemed that first and only love! Parodying its raptures, its devotion, its enthusiasm, I loved; or rather, I believed that I loved M. de Lancry. I soon perceived my error; I shed bitter tears over this new guilt, so inefficacious for my happiness. I do not wish to justify the odious conduct of M. de Lancry toward me, Matilda; but perhaps he would have perceived the lukewarmness of my affection, although I had shown him a devotion without bounds. Every day I felt convinced, with a sickening sadness that one may love but once; even if the second love should have the vigour of the first, it would always be a repetition, an echo, a reflection. After my rupture with M. de Lancry—last and fatal trial—I returned into the world without interest, thinking continually of my daughter, whom custom did not permit me to have at my side: then I heard of Emma's illness; a woman in whom I had all faith, Mademoiselle Albin, whom I had given to my child as governess, had been bribed by the offers of M. Lugarto."

"What infamy!"

"She gave up to him the correspondence that I had always kept up with her, as well as all the letters that had reference to Emma's birth, which I had confided to her; the frequent voyages of M. de Mortagne, not permitting that excellent friend to take this charge upon himself. When my husband had exacted from me a last concession at the bed-side of my dying daughter, I made a vow—if God deigned to restore her to life—to give up the world for ever, and to pass the remainder of my days in a retirement, which should have all the characteristics of a religious life. God had pity on me, and spared my Emma. Since that vow, I cannot express to you the calm that I have enjoyed."

"My existence will henceforth be passed between my daughter and the exercise of that religion, whose infinite loftiness I begin to comprehend. I am so happy at this prospect, Matilda; so happy, that I tremble lest some new misfortune should occur to destroy it. Look you: I have been too guilty to have a right to such felicity," added Madame de Richeville, with a profound sigh.

"Ah! think not so, madam! God forgives so much repentance!"

"May he hear you, Matilda!"

"And at present whither go you, madam?"

"To Paris. I shall retire into the Convent of Sacré Cœur, where I am going to place Emma. She will pass for an orphan relative of mine. The Superior of the Convent gives up to me a small apartment in that holy abode; it is there that I shall live henceforward. When Emma is of an age to marry, I shall beg M. de Mortagne, and yourself, Matilda—you, who know the sad secret of her birth—to seek a man sufficiently generous not to render this poor child responsible for the guilt of her mother. I will give up to her the remainder of my fortune, with the exception of a moderate pension. I shall consecrate my life henceforward to the expiation of my faults; and God, perhaps, will listen to the vows which I shall make for the happiness of my daughter."

There was in the words, in the avowal of Madame de Richeville, so much simplicity; she announced her resolution so firmly and so sincerely, that I was profoundly moved by it. I was also touched to see her, so beautiful, so young yet—for she was not, at the outside, more than thirty-four or thirty-five—devote herself to so profound a retirement; and renounce the world, in which she might still have shone, with so many advantages.

"Ah! madam!" said I to her, "it cannot be, but that God will look upon you with pity and pardon."

"He has already been so merciful in restoring me my child, and in endowing her so highly! for you can have no idea of her adorable qualities. If you knew what a heart, what a soul, what an enchanting spirit! No! maternal love does not blind me!" said the duchess, unable to restrain her tears; "it is impossible to find more excellence, joined to more nobleness, to more right-mindedness; and then, a stability so boundless and so true. Her soul may be read in her angelic look, and then—but, forgive me! forgive me! Matilda. Pardon! poor mother; but I find so seldom an opportunity to say, 'My daughter,' that I abuse——"

"Ah! can you believe it, madam? Think you, that I do not feel how much the constraint that you put upon yourself must be painful to you?"

"Yes! oh! yes!—bitterly painful, Matilda. Above all, when I am alone with Emma; although I overwhelm her with tenderness; although she tenderly loves me; alas! she knows it not—she never shall know that I am her mother! It seems to me, that if she knew it, she would love me in another fashion; it seems to me that her voice would have another accent, her eyes another look—I am to her but a distant relation, whom she has seldom seen. How would it be if she knew that I am her mother? Sometimes I am on the point of avowing all to her; but shame restrains me. Never will I expose myself to blush before that angel. But again, pardon me, Matilda, for speaking to you so much of myself. Now you know my life, you will imitate my confidence. Now, Matilda, let us talk of yourself. I conjure you, hide nothing from me. Believe me, the experience of misfortune matures the reason. My counsels may be useful to you."

After a moment's hesitation, I related to Madame de Richeville all the motives which I had for being jealous of Ursula; my suspicions as to her *liason* with Monsieur Chopinelle, what I had overheard of her conversation with my husband, and lastly, my fears of the speedy arrival of my cousin. Madame de Richeville said to me—"Matilda, you still love your husband passionately. So much the better; such a love as yours is a holy and noble thing; without doubt one suffers, but the heart is full, and that feverish and unquiet heat is better than emptiness and nothingness. Your cousin seems to me a very dangerous person. Formerly, Mademoiselle de Maran was always exalting you at the expense of Ursula with a malice deeply calculated. She knew that women of that character forget nothing, and that with them the wounds of pride are incurable. Ursula will wish to avenge on you the humiliations of her youth, the ridicule of her husband, the ridicule of her first lover. A fatality made you a witness to many scenes, at which she blushes; she will never forget it. Look upon her, then, as your most mortal enemy. You have been perfection to her: the wicked never forget the good that we do them."

"And, nevertheless, she is coming to protest to me her hypocritical friendship! Never! oh! never will I allow it!"

"Matilda, you know the intractable character of your husband; if he chooses that you should receive your cousin, you will be compelled to obey him."

"Oh! never! never!"

"Poor child! what will you do?"

"I will entreat Gontran; he will see my tears, he will have pity on me, for I am certain that if she come hither I shall fall ill."

"Monsieur de Lancry will not have pity, Matilda; for I believe with you, that perhaps this journey has been agreed upon between himself and Ursula."

"You believe then, that he loves her?"

"As much as he is capable of loving. From what you tell me, I doubt not that your cousin has put on with him a bold and provoking coquetry. Their understanding will be at once established. Without the chance which allowed you to surprise some words of their conversation, your suspicions would not have been awakened."

"But what to do—my God! what to do? with my cousin once here, madam, my misfortune will be inevitable; Gontran will care only for her, and each moment of my life will be a torture."

"Do not believe it. If you follow my advice, Ursula will but remain some days with you, during which time she will repulse even the slightest advances of your husband."

"What do you tell me, madam?"

"Listen to me, Matilda. Your cousin,—that woman so melancholy, so romantic—holds, above all, to the influence which she exercises over her husband. To insure this influence, nothing costs her too dear. She flatters his vulgarity, shares it, exaggerates it; that is plain enough. Ursula is proud, avaricious, and poor. She urges her husband to work, that she may soon be in a condition to lead a life of opulence in Paris. Let M. Secherin know to-morrow that Ursula is deceiving him—to-morrow he abandons her, and she becomes poor again without any other resource than her dower. She married to be rich; and she will sacrifice much, if not all, to preserve her fortune."

"Ah! madam, her husband loves her so much—he is so good, so weak!"

"From what you have told me of him, he must be as determined, as he is honourable and devoted; such characters never truckle to dishonour, nor descend to meanness. He adores his wife: but the moment that he is sure she dishonours him, he will abandon her; he will be distressed beyond endurance, perhaps, but he will never see her more."

"Do you advise me, then, to denounce Ursula?" I cried.

"I advise you, my child, to await your cousin here, and on the day of her arrival to say to her, calmly and firmly: 'Your journey to Maran was arranged with my husband. I am not your dupe; I declare to you, that I am resolved at all hazards to remove you from my house. I cannot hinder M. de Lancry from letting himself be seduced by your coquetries, but I will not suffer you to come here to brave me. You govern M. Secherin completely; it will therefore be easy for you, within five or six days, to decide him to set out on the plea of a coldness in our friendship, for which I will very naturally give you an occasion. If you refuse, to-morrow I address myself to your husband; and avow frankly that, right or wrong, I am jealous of you, and beg him to carry you away. Now, let us see if you will accord that to me with a good grace, which I can obtain by other means.' Speak to her thus, Matilda," added Madame de Richeville, and I swear to you that she will not hesitate to go. She will fear, with reason, that, the suspicions of her husband once awakened, he may give up that blind confidence, in which are comprised all the power, all the boldness, and all the future schemes of your cousin."

I had attentively listened to Madame de Richeville. What she said to me appeared just and true. A thousand forgotton circumstances, recurring to my mind, proved to me that the duchess understood exactly the character of Ursula. I only confessed to her, that I stood in fear of the brazen assurance of which my cousin had given me so many proofs.

"Then, Matilda, I charge you, above all things, to enter into no discussion with her; keep strictly to this—'Go away from my house, or I unmask you to your husband'—nothing more, nothing less."

"Ah! madam, it is cruel."

"Matilda, no weakness! all would be lost."

"Alas! madam, if Gontran no longer loves me, he will sacrifice me to any other as well as to Ursula," said I, with a sense of oppression.

"My poor child, we must always in life commence by enjoying all the repose and all the happiness which are within our reach. Ursula out of the way, you will be tranquil until the winter; this will be so much gained; once returned to Paris, if you still fear her coquetries, you will have recourse to the same threats. I fancy your generosity shrinks from them—but you will not come to this extremity. Believe me, the threat that you make to your cousin, will suffice to cause her to renounce her projects of seduction. She will have too much fear of becoming poor again by the desertion of her husband, to put you to the necessity of ruining her. Such women as she are incapable of a sacrifice, even when in connection with their own evil passions.

Madame Blondeau, entering with Emma, put an end to our conversation.

Emma ran to her mother, and embracing her, presented to her a large bouquet of roses. The walk had heightened her complexion, to the liveliest and most charming colours. She came and sat down a moment on one of the drawing-room divans, between the duchess and myself. Madame de Richeville placed the bouquet on her knees, took one of Emma's hands in her own, and with the other smoothed the bands of her daughter's fair hair, which the walk had slightly disarranged. In looking at us all three—that child, her mother, and myself—in comparing our three ages, and three existencies, I reflected, alas! with bitterness, that I had no longer the confiding security of the young girl, and that I had not yet acquired that subdued resignation that grief had given to her mother.

I thought of all the sorrows that I should have yet to undergo, before reaching, like Madame de Richeville, the abandonment of all human hopes. The age of action for a woman, if I may so speak, is especially comprised between fifteen and thirty years. Emma, myself, and Madame de Richeville, we united those three periods of life—the calm, the innocent, and pure; the stormy turmoil of the passions; and the depression, which succeeds to them, when the heart, bruised in the struggle, seeks repose in utter quiet.

Madame de Richeville felt a repugnance to seeing Gontran. At the close of the day she left me. She had received no news from M. de Mortagne; he had not replied to my letter, informing him of the intention of my husband to dispose of Maran. I felt some uneasiness. Madame de Richeville promised me to write immediately after her arrival in Paris, to reassure me on this subject. She recommended me, also, to keep her well advised of all that might occur at Maran after the arrival of Ursula, and to call to my remembrance her own counsels. I parted from this excellent friend with a cruel and heartfelt pang.

In the evening, when Gontran returned from hunting, I informed him of the visit of Madame de Richeville. He appeared very indignant at it. I then gave him the letter of M. Secherin, which announced the approaching arrival of my cousin. M. de Lancry replied coldly, that he was well satisfied at it, as Ursula would keep me company. Four or five days after my interview with Madame de Richeville, Monsieur and Madame Secherin arrived at Maran.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE TWO FRIENDS.

Ursula threw herself upon my neck and embraced me with warmth. I replied coldly to these tokens of friendship. My cousin saw not, or pretended not to see, the coolness of my reception. After the first compliments, M. Secherin said to me with a sigh, and looking at his wife:

"Well, cousin, the day after your departure, we separated from my mother, and left Rouvrai. Alas! yes, you have no idea, cousin, how much it cost my wife. Her very soul was distressed at it, which proves the goodness of her heart; for, without injustice, mother had been very severe and very unkind towards her. But what will you have? When once old folks get anything into their heads, there is no getting it out again."

"You live still but a little way from Rouvrai," said I to him, so as to be able to see your mother, and superintend your factory?"

"Yes, undoubtedly, cousin, I often see my mother; she is very well, and as my wife says, I am sure that she prefers this arrangement, now that it is made; she is much more at liberty, and we also. But she has never been willing to receive Ursula. What will you have? it is her fancy. My wife has cried much about it. However, it does not matter; we are not talking of that. Now, my factory goes well by itself; reckoning everything, I have sixty-eight thousand livres income; and, by my faith, Ursula and I, we wish to enjoy life a little. You do not know our project?"

"No truly, my dear cousin."

"My friend," said Ursula, "You are going to be indiscreet; I entreat you to———"

"Indiscreet with our good cousin!" cried M. Secherin, interrupting his wife, "is that possible? Is she not your sister, your best friend from childhood?" And leaning to my ear, M. Secherin whispered me: "You see, cousin, I say *you*, I no longer *thou* to my wife." He continued, aloud: "And besides, I am sure that what I am about to propose to our cousin, will give her, as it has given us, real pleasure. In a word, my lady viscountess, at this time of your marriage, you proposed to give up to us a suite of rooms in your hotel, in Paris, of which you did not occupy the whole. Well! we accept it!"

I looked at Ursula with as much surprise as indignation; she seemed not to understand me, and smiled at me affectionately, while M. Secherin continued:

"Do you remember what it was you said to us, cousin? 'Come to Paris, we will make but one family—the winter at Paris, the summer at Maran, or at Rouvrai.' Well, these fine projects, which pleased you so much and ourselves also, are about to be realised. We will leave each other no more. Every year I will go to see my mother. I shall leave Ursula with you. I have a dwelling-room fitted up for me at my factory. Now, we are come to ask your hospitality here, until we set out together for Paris. That I may not have my time and my money both unemployed, I shall take an interest in the banking-house of one of my friends—a safe house, as it has stood the test of the revolution of July. This will occupy me during my stay in Paris. Some time hence, however, I must leave you, to make a little journey. It is about a farm, which it is proposed that I should buy, and which I wish to visit. During that time, you and Ursula can arrange everything for our establishment in Paris. So much for us as lodgers, as if we were strangers, eh, cousin? But, in fact, women understand nothing about business, so I will settle it with M. de Lancry. Well, cousin; confess that you did not expect this—and that we have managed pretty well to surprise you.

Monsieur Secherin had but little observation; he did not notice my wonder. My position became so much the more awkward, because, in truth, at the time when I had a blind confidence in the friendship of Ursula, I had made her this proposal, and begged her to accept it.

"Interpreting my silence in his own fashion, M. Secherin cried out.

"Well, well! you do not retract. I was sure of it; you would not think us capable of supposing it?"

"In truth, cousin, I was so far from hoping——"

The Young Friends

"That we should call to mind your offers, my dear Matilda? Oh! that would have been to do injustice to me first, and then to my husband," said Ursula, in a tone of gentle reproach.

Not wishing to have a scene, until I had my proposed conversation with her, according to Madame de Richeville's advice, I replied with sufficient embarrassment—

"Without doubt, I did hope for this good fortune, my dear cousin; but I did not reckon on it as so near, and I am charmed with this readiness on your part."

"And I believe you, cousin, because you say so. Oh! I know you—you are not one of those women who say yes, when they mean no. My mother was always repeating to me: 'Madame de Lancry is truth itself; she is honour personified. What she says is Gospel word.' Was it not so, Ursula?"

"Undoubtedly, my friend; and your mother in saying that, thought as I did."

"Yes, truly. Why, look you, cousin, you have no friend—what do I say?—no sister more devoted to you, than my wife. It is always Matilda here, Matilda there. In fact, and especially since your little journey to Rouvrai, she is, as it were, possessed to come and live with you. You may imagine how that suits me, who only swear by you, not forgetting my cousin Lancry. Oh! cousin, as they say, the two make the pair. You were born for M. de Lancry, as M. de Lancry was born for you. Just as I without vanity, was born for Ursula, and Ursula was born for me; but it is absolutely the fact, the great lords are made for great ladies, like yourself," added M. de Secherin, breaking out into a laugh. "Your neat little citizens' daughters, like Ursula, are made for such good citizens as myself."

"I am not of your opinion, cousin—there is none of this difference between Ursula and myself. Are we not relations?" said I, seeing that the conversation was taking an unpleasant turn, and M. de Secherin was deeply wounding the pride of his wife.

Unfortunately, when my cousin struck upon any idea, it was impossible to take him off from it, so he continued:

"You do not understand me, cousin; I do not speak of birth. I know well that my wife's family is noble, and that I am only a good citizen; but I say that you and your husband—you have in you something superior, something imposing, which neither I nor Ursula have; and, for my part, I am very glad of it. Yes, very glad of it. Do you think, that if my wife had your air of a proud princess, I should have *thou'd* her on my wedding day? Ah? no: I never should have dared. On the contrary, Ursula, with her charming little mincing air, which I dote upon more and more, put me at my ease at once. I said to her *thou*, she said *thou* to me; and we were in a moment a couple of friends. In fact, between you and her, there is this difference, that——"

"Oh! I must stop you there," said I to M. Secherin. "Do not try to give us an account of the difference of the impressions that we make; be content to appreciate them. You love Ursula passionately, which is the reason why you have such perfect confidence in her; why you find, with reason, in her a grace and charm the most attractive; while you find myself dignified and imposing. You have love for her, and you have for me a frank and sincere friendship—that is the difference."

"It is wonderful, how you give a reason for everything!" cried M. Secherin.

"Ah! apropos of something wonderful. I am about to astonish you. Have not I become a horsewoman?"

"How so?"

"Again, another proof of my husband's devotion," said Ursula. "After your departure, my dearest Matilda, my physician ordered me horse exercise. M. Secherin had the goodness to send to town for a ridingmaster; and he has shared my lessons, to be able to accompany me."

The idea immediately crossed me, that Ursula had learned to ride on horseback so as to be able—once at Maran—to arrange her *tête-a-têtes* with my husband; for, since our arrival, Gontran had always refused to allow me to take that exercise.

"And you cannot imagine," resumed my cousin, "with what ardour and what courage Ursula has been learning. What was recommended to her for her health, has become to her a real pleasure; she mounts her horse two or three times a day in a meadow adjoining the factory, which seems to have been made for this purpose. She was so fearless, so intrepid, that the master said he had never seen any one with such a disposition for it.

"Ah! my dear, you exaggerate;" said Ursula."

"I exaggerate? Well; I'll lay a wager that there is not a horse of Monsieur de Lancry's that Ursula cannot ride," cried M. Secherin; and as for me, I cannot say as much; nor you either, cousin, for you are scarcely a washerwoman, I think."

"No, cousin. But it would be very imprudent for Ursula to mount one of Monsieur de Lancry's horses; not one is broken for a lady—it would be dangerous for her."

"Dangerous! Ah! you know her well! Is she afraid of anything? Ah! once on horseback!—if you saw her, how well she looks, and how her amazone becomes her! how it sets off her figure! My head turns with only looking at her! Thou wilt show thy amazone, to our cousin eh?"

"You know well, my dear, that they say a habit, and not an amazone," said Ursula, smiling.

"True, true; thou hast told me: I had forgotten it. Oh! art thou not Mademoiselle de Maran? Cousin, is she not?"

"My good Matilda will not grudge me this little reproach, which I make to you, my friend, for she herself recommended me always to let you know what you said rightly or otherwise. Is it not so, sister?"

"Yes, yes;" I replied unconsciously.

"I was overwhelmed. Jealousy, and shall I say it, envy tortured me. I already saw Ursula on horseback by the side of Gontran, coquettish, bold, impetuous, and both setting out for long rides, and I—I remaining alone! 'No, no,' I said to myself, trembling with anger, 'it shall not be so. Ursula must go; I will follow Madame de Richeville's advice.'"

At the moment that I was giving up to these bitter thoughts, Ursula continued. "Why, it is the dinner hour, my dear Matilda. Will you have the goodness to send for my maid, that we may be shown to our apartments?"

"Ah! yes, and make thyself pretty; thou hast brought such charming dresses. Imagine, cousin," said M. de Secherin: "she had so many trunks, and bandboxes, that I was obliged to hire a baggage-waggon at Tours to bring all these effects, including Celestine's—Mademoiselle Celestine, I should say—a lady's maid, such as my wife sent for to Paris. It is true, I must say, that she dresses hair to the very perfection of perfections."

These preparations for coquetry on the part of Ursula still further increased my suspicions; I could not avoid saying, with some bitterness, "Good Heavens! Why have you then made so much preparation? What! to pass a little time with us, who see nobody! Why, truly! one would say that you had some fine schemes of conquest; I know not whom you would fascinate here. This is really very childish," added I, in an altered voice, and forcing myself to smile.

Ursula answered nothing; but she pointed out to me M. Secherin, by a coquettish but charming movement of her head, and said, with a candour most marvelously well assumed, "Heaven! I would fascinate my husband: that is all."

M. Secherin could not resist the attack. He seized his wife's hand, kissed it tenderly several times, and said: "Is she not sweet, and natural? eh? cousin, is she not? But she is right. You forgot, then your lessons, when you said to me: 'My dear cousin, it is for her husband, above all, that a wife should adorn herself, and incur expense; and vice versa, that it is for his wife that a husband should do the same! Ah!—ah!—cousin, we forget not your advice, be assured. So, I shall imitate Ursula, and ask your leave to go and make myself as handsome as I can for her; for you have said, that as soon as a husband is negligent, it is a proof that he is no longer in love with his wife; and when he is no longer in love with his wife ——"

"Everything may be exaggerated," said I to M. Secherin, interrupting him; for Gontran might have come in at any moment, and I should have been deeply humiliated if Ursula had been allowed to see with what disdain my husband had, for some time, treated me.

I continued then: "There is a certain liberty which accords perfectly with country life—altogether solitary—a full-dress toilette is then almost out of place, almost in bad taste."

"Ah! Matilda, Matilda! look at home, then," said Ursula, smiling. "What elegance! I have never seen you dressed with more coquetry."

I knew not what to reply. Unwilling to neglect any means of re-animating the love of Gontran at Maran, as heretofore, in our little home at Chantilly, I had but one end—that of pleasing him as much as possible, in spite of his disdain. At this moment, I heard a door open: I recognized the step of Gontran. I blushed with shame. He entered. What was my surprise! He was dressed with elegance, and the most studied refinement. I was so accustomed to see him in his miserable accoutrements, that I scarcely recognized him. I carefully watched Ursula as my husband entered; she did not blush. Gontran put on a grace and cordiality that were perfect. His features which, during two months, were scarcely ever relaxed toward me, resumed that enchanting expression that, when he wished it, gave them an irresistible fascination. Ursula and her husband left us some minutes before dinner. I could not refrain, myself from saying to Gontran:

"You knew, without doubt, that Ursula was here?"

"Why? Because I have put off my hunting costume, and because I do not put it off when I am alone with you?"

"Certainly. It may be childish, but it seems to me that what you do for a stranger———"

"What I might do for you—is that it?" he asked.

"I imagine, my dear, that I have the same right as my cousin, to be treated by you with some consideration."

"Allow me, my dear, to call to your notice, that consideration does not consist in a coat made in one mode or another. It is very rational that I should dress myself suitably to receive your cousin. It is not I, who invited her to come here; it is yourself. I supposed, then, that I was doing what was agreeable to you, in receiving her in my best manner, and in paying her that attention which every man owes to the woman whom he has the honour to receive."

"You did not know, then, that Ursula was coming here this autumn?" asked I of my husband, endeavouring to read his countenance. He remained impassive, and replied:

"I was by no means aware of it; but, after all, now I am delighted with it. Her presence will amuse you, and her husband is the best of men. But what is the matter? The arrival of the friend of your youth does not give you the pleasure that I should expect."

"I have reasons for it, my friend. And I fear that the stay of my cousin here, may not be as long as she wishes it to be, perhaps."

"Her husband's business will shorten it then? Has she informed you of it?"

"No—but——"

"But?—what do you mean?"

"I, myself, will beg Ursula to go."

"You? and why?"

"Because—because——"

"Well?"

"Because I have reason to be afraid of her presence; because—I am jealous of her, Gontran!"

"Of your cousin? Bah! you are crazy, my dear."

"I am not crazy, Gontran; the instinct of my heart does not deceive me."

"If this is it, you will make her stay at Maran extremely pleasant!—a promising prospect. It is said, that with you one can never have a moment's repose. Ah! what an unhappy character you have—both for yourself and others?"

"But, it is not my fault if I have suspicions; if———"

"But, once more, your suspicions have no common sense; reflect, that you are accusing me without cause, and tormenting yourself without motive."

"Is this true? really true? Gontran, be generous! Reassure me—I tremble so—"

"Poor Matilda!" said Gontran, with touching dignity, "I will speak to you no more of my love; you will not perhaps believe me. But I tell you that M. Secherin, our relation, is come to stay with us; and that I should be a wretch if I dreamed only of abusing in this base way, the hospitality that we offer him."

I pressed the hand of Gontran within my own. These simple and noble words gave me a new courage. Ursula and her husband entered again. I found my cousin so pretty, so fresh, so rosy; her eyes were at once so soft and so brilliant, her smile so delicate and so malicious, her figure so perfect; that I threw my eyes upon a mirror placed opposite to me, in order to compare myself with Ursula. Alas! I remarked with sorrow that I was pale, and that my features were altered, faded, and languished. For some time past, I had been suffering; I felt always a vague uneasiness and a wretched oppression, that I attributed to grief, and which increased incessantly. For the first time, I perceived that my face had already lost that first bloom of youthfulness, which rendered the features of Ursula so enchanting.

The dinner was very gay—thanks to my husband, who threw into it much zest and enjoyment. Ursula was visibly annoyed. She feared to appear too lively in my eyes, and thus lose her credit for being melancholy; but, on the other hand, she regretted not being able to show herself to Gontran under a more brilliant aspect. Toward the end of dinner, M. Secherin returned to his unhappy proposition:

"Cousin," said he, to M. de Lancry, "I wagered, against Madame de Lancry just now, that my wife would be able to ride any one of your horses."

"What! madam! you ride on horseback!" said Gontran, with astonishment. "But this is a pleasant circumstance for us, I might almost say for yourself; for the neighbourhood of Maran is delicious, and I am delighted to be able to offer you this amusement."

"But, my dear," said I to my husband, "you have no lady's horses—for you know you never would allow me to accompany you hunting. It would be exceedingly imprudent to expose Ursula to——"

"But I have already told you that my wife is an excellent horsewoman," cried M. Secherin, interrupting me. "For two months past she has done nothing but ride."

"Matilda is right," said Ursula, with resignation; it "would be more prudent to abstain from this exercise."

"You should feel assured, madam," said Gontran to her, "that I would not, for anything in the world, expose you to danger. Madame de Lancry has never been on horseback in her life; besides, from prudence, I have determined to deprive myself of the pleasure of taking her with me; while you, according to what my cousin says——"

"I answer for it; my wife will astonish you," observed M. Secherin. The riding-master of Tours was astonished at her."

"I have, in fact, a most excellent and very quiet mare," said M. de Lancry; "she would exactly suit Madame Secherin; and if my cousin will only place some confidence in me, she need have no fear."

"I have, without doubt, entire confidence in you, cousin," said Ursula hesitating; "but, all things considered, I should be sorry to enjoy a pleasure in which Matilda cannot take part."

"But you are a baby!" said M. Secherin to his wife. "Because Madame de Lancry does not ride on horseback, she will not prevent your doing so. Am I right, cousin?"

"Come my dear Matilda," said Gontran to me, "you must finally decide the question; your supreme wisdom shall be the sole judge. Do you permit, or not, Madame Secherin to ride? Take care, if you say no; as you will deprive her, as well as myself, of a very great pleasure. We shall both of us treasure up a mortal enmity—I give you warning."

"And they would do right, and I should join them," cried M. Secherin laughing outright; "for you would prevent my wife from appearing in all her beauty. She never looks better than on horseback."

I could not advance any serious reason, and I therefore stammered a reply: "I do not oppose it. It was only from prudence that I remarked to Ursula——"

"Oh! be assured, there will be no danger," said my husband. "I answer for the quietness of Stella: a child might ride her."

"Since you absolutely wish it, Matilda," said my cousin to me, "I will try; but, really, I am afraid I shall be so awkward."

"Oh! as for that," returned Gontran, with a smile, "I defy you, and I may do so without flattery; for it is impossible for some certain persons not to do everything with grace and address,—and it is not their fault, if they are charming besides."

"Bravo! and when shall this party be?" asked M. Secherin.

"To-morrow. The sunset was magnificent this evening," said Gontran; "It will be splendid weather. We will mount our horses at one o'clock, and we will have a splendid lady's chase."

"Ah! and I, cousin; and I am too poor a horsewoman to follow the chase—I tell you beforehand."

"You, my dear Monsieur Secherin—you shall accompany us in a carriage, with Madame de Lancry, one of my keepers, who knows the forest perfectly, shall go on horseback, and will conduct you into the cross-ways, where you will have an excellent view of the hunt passing."

"Capital! Here is a fête—a royal pleasure!" cried M. Secherin. "I, who have never hunted, but with my gamekeeper and his two terriers! If it be only fine——"

"I assure you, that it will be superb weather to-morrow; Madame Secherin desires it so much, that it must be so. To-morrow will be an enchanting day, I answer for it," said Gontran.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE CHASE.

It was impossible for me, during the evening, to speak apart to my cousin; she shared the apartment of her husband, and two or three times after dinner it seemed to me that she avoided me. I suffered cruelly during the night. To the physical uneasiness which had for some time troubled me, was added an excessive grief. I experienced all the most bitter jealousy. In vain I wished to convince myself of the injustice, of the exaggeration of my suspicions; in vain I repeated to myself that, perchance, at the bottom of Ursula's conduct, there might only be an innocent coquetry; I could not reassure myself. I made up my mind that, during this cruel day, I would attentively observe my cousin and my husband; and that on the following day, I would have a serious explanation with her.

Gontran was not deceived in his expectations; the day was radiant, and a replendent October sun announced one of those latter days of autumn, almost as fair as those of summer. At noon, we set off for the rendezvous of the chase. M. de Lancry had put his attendants into full livery; from the windows of the chateau we had seen them set off with the dogs, to the echoing sound of the horns. An open carriage, with four horses, approached the steps: I entered it with M. Secherin. I insist upon these puerile details of opulence for two reasons only: in the first place, because I saw from the expression of Ursula's countenance, that she equally admired and envied this luxury; and secondly, because this preparation for a fête contrasted painfully with my own sorrow.

I waited with impatience the appearance of Ursula. I was curious to know, if she had so excellent a seat on her horse as her husband represented; I hoped that it were otherwise. I desired that something might occur to her, not exactly a dangerous accident, but some mischance, such as would render her ridiculous in the eyes of Gontran, and punish her for her presumption. Alas! I had not this miserable satisfaction. When my cousin joined us on horseback with my husband, I was compelled to acknowledge her more beautiful than I had ever seen her. By the way, I never could understand how jealousy should deny or misrepresent the advantages of a rival; for my own part, on the contrary, I have always been inclined to exaggerate them. But, without exaggeration, Ursula was so perfectly elegant and graceful on her horse, that I was on the point of crying with spite.

I see her still: her riding-habit of dark-blue cloth, whose skirt almost swept the ground, fitted tightly in the waist and sleeves; it showed off to perfection her rounded figure.

She wore a man's hat, with a plain collar turned over a little cravat of cherry-colored satin. Her sweet face, so fresh and blooming, borrowed from this costume a roguish and decided air, which became her wonderfully; her beautiful brown hair, set off her dimpled cheeks. Never had I seen her eyes of a purer blue; one would have said, that the heaven itself found in them a mirror. The mare that she rode with such ease as to surprise me, was a bright bay, whose glossy coat sparkled in the sun, and whose long black mane and tail undulated and fluttered in the wind. She seemed pleased to carry so light a weight, and moved with so easy a step, that she scarcely glanced along the turf.

Gontran was on a thorough-bred horse, black as ebony. He wore a coat in the fashion of his livery, of light blue, with a collar of orange velvet, and buttons of silver, ornamented in silver gilt. The belt for his hunting sword, partly silver and partly gilt, bound in his graceful figure, and his cap of black velvet, exposing his features, gave a higher charm to their beauty and expression. The finished appearance of Gontran struck me the more, because, for hunting, he was always dressed in the most slovenly manner. My cousin wished to approach the carriage to speak to me. Her mare, without doubt, frightened by my parasol, refused to advance. I confess it to my shame, I was delighted at this mishap, which threw Ursula's horsemanship into the shade; but, to my great astonishment, if I dare not say alarm, she knitted her pretty eyebrows, raised her riding-whip, and began boldly to chastise her horse.

"Take care! madam, do not strike Stella, she is very skittish!" cried Gontran, frightened at the audacity of Ursula.

"Do not be obstinate, my little wife, I implore you!" my cousin called out as he stretched out his two clasped hands toward her.

But she, herself—her cheeks purpled, her nostrils dilated, her eyes sparkling with anger, her rosy lips arched with a scornful smile, paid no heed to these warnings. She inflicted resolutely another chastisement upon Stella, who reared so violently, that I uttered a cry of horror. Ursula, without appearing in the least degree intimidated, leaning over the shoulder of Stella, laying her whip upon her, and all with a movement so natural, that she did not seem to run any risk of danger.

"Bravo! cousin! capital!" cried Gontran, unable to conceal his admiration. "What coolness! what courage!"

Still further excited by this approbation, Ursula determined to overcome the obstinacy of her mare, and to compel her to approach the carriage. A few more strokes of her whip, laid on with a firm hand, gained the point with Stella, after a new struggle of some moments, during which she plunged instead of prancing. Ursula—whose figure, rounded, elegant, and delicate, undulated with the suppleness of a snake—accommodated herself with so much grace to the capricious movements of her horse, that she did not lose her seat for a moment. This incident, which I hoped to see turned against my cousin, seemed only to lend her a new charm; she subdued the fiery animal, and forced her to remain at the side of the carriage. Then, bending herself lightly upon her saddle, Ursula, proud and smiling, patted the muscular neck of Stella with her little white hand, which she had coquettishly ungloved. She enjoyed her triumph, and threw a brilliant look upon Gontran, as if to say, that it was his presence that had given her so much courage.

"Well, cousin!" said M. Secherin, "what did I tell you? Is she not bold? Confess that she is a real page."

"In truth, madam," exclaimed Gontran, approaching with considerable emotion, "I can but think of your intrepidity and your grace. One forgets the danger that you run in the admiration that you excite."

"Oh! it is amusing to ride on horseback!" said Ursula, with *naivette*. And addressing herself to me: "How can you deprive yourself of this enchanting pleasure? For us women, above all, what happiness to be able, in spite of our feebleness, to master, tame, and rule a being, that would kill us a thousand times, if we did not oppose address to force, and intelligent will to its animal obstinacy."

"This is about the history of your denomination in general," said Gontran, with a smile; "and you subdue us men pretty nearly after the same principle, and by the same means. But, Heavens! what is the matter with you, my dear?" said M. de Lancry, to myself, as he remarked the alteration in my features—the triumph of Ursula and the admiration of Gontran, so plainly shown, having caused me a severe pang.

"It is nothing, my dear—only the example of Ursula encourages me; and beginning from to-morrow, I have determined absolutely to ride on horseback."

"But you have never tried, my dear, and then I do not think you have the requisite qualifications; you are too timid."

"I tell you that I will ride, even if I should be killed on the spot," cried I.

"Well, well! we will of it," said Gontran; "but come away to the rendezvous of the hunt, for it is already late."

"Cousin, I am at your service."

"We shall see each other again presently: adieu! Matilda," said Ursula, making me a sign with her hand.

"Do not be imprudent, my good little wife; M. de Lancry, I commend her to you," exclaimed M. Secherin.

"Be assured, my dear cousin," added my husband, "when one is so light, so skilful, and so bold, there is never any risk."

Ursula and Gontran set off at a hand-gallop, side by side, upon the green sward which extended down the alley, wherein our carriage was moving along. For some time we accompanied them. I followed them with my eyes as long as I could; but they quickly disappeared in a winding-path, through which the caleche could not pass, and I lost sight of them.

All these details will seem puerile to those who know not the innumerable pangs of jealousy, and the sharp wounds of offended self-love. This scene, however, in appearance so insignificant, so completely overwhelmed me, that I was on the point of committing an infamous action, in denouncing to M. Secherin the conduct of Ursula, and making him participate in my suspicions of his wife. Shame, happily, kept back this terrible avowal, which was on my lips. If my cousin had had the least penetration, he would have divined the cause of my agitation, and my disquietude. I was distracted in my answers to him, and occasionally fell into profound reveries, scarcely interrupted by the baying of the pack; which, from time to time, traversed the broad alleys leading to the open spots in which we were placed to see it pass, under escort of one of the servants of M. de Lancry. What produced upon me a deep, fatal, and strange impression, was to see Gontran and Ursula appear from time to time at the end of some shady path, and always side by side. The distant and melancholy sound of the horns which were re-echoed through the lofty and deeply shadowed woods, and the loud baying of the pack, seemed to me ominous and fearful. Alas! sad impressions on the spirit, veil with a sombre hue the gayest objects, and seek gloomy presages in that which causes universal joy and excitement. M. Secherin was so transported with the moving spectacle which he had before his eyes, that he did not notice my state of langour and distress; the uneasiness which I had felt for some time increased more and more. I experienced frequent tremors, new to me, and which I attributed to a nervous affection. My head was heavy, sad, and weak.

We had just arrived and halted at an open spot in the forest—Ursula and Gontran advanced rapidly up one of the side alleys. I thought they were about to rejoin us, and I leaned forward from the carriage. They were, in fact, soon near us: as she swiftly passed and saluted me with her hand; "I am mad! I am intoxicated with this hunting!"

And, her cheeks flushed, her eyes sparkling and bold, she give a stroke with her whip to her mare, to quicken her pace.

"The stag will not hold out now more than half an hour," cried Gontran to us; "the dogs run admirably—he is about to break cover."

And leaning forward over his horse's shoulder, he came up with Ursula, who had for a moment outstripped him, and the two disappeared again.

"How she is amused! Heavens! how she is amused!" said M. Secherin with delight. "But, cousin, what does M. Gontran mean by the words, 'he is about to break cover?'"

I had heard my husband speak of hunting sufficiently often to enable me to reply to the question of M. Secherin.

"It means, that the luckless animal, hard pressed in the wood, is going to take the plain; it is his last chance of safety; after which his throat will be cut without pity."

I was in such a nervous state, I had so long repressed my tears, that, seizing this absurd opportunity to abandon myself to a fit of sensibility, I burst into a flood of tears. M. Secherin looked at me with an astonished air, and said with feeling, "Why! how is it, that the death of a stag saddens you so much? you, who should be accustomed to these things. Come, cousin, be reasonable! perhaps, after all, the poor victim may escape its unhappy fate!"

Those who have suffered much from inward sorrow, constrained and forcibly hidden, will not smile with scorn, when I say, that in replying to the last words of M. Secherin, I made a sort of allusion to my own individual fate; thereby enabling myself to vent, without being understood, some portion of the grief which oppressed me. It is absurd, bitterly absurd. Alas! I know it—happy are they who know it not—that the most poignant suffering is sometimes grotesque in its expression; and this, in my opinion, is the height of moral torture.

I replied accordingly, in tears, to M. Secherin: "No, no: the victim will not be able to escape; what can it do? Struggle, you may say; but it must have force to struggle, and it is now powerless. This has lasted long; it has but to resign itself, to stretch out its neck to the knife, and die. Yet life has seemed fair to it. Moreover, who would dream of dying under this glorious sun? with the noise of these flourishes of the horns and the joyous cries of the hunters, who would think of dying? For whom is this fête a scene of mourning? for the victim only. It will weep, and they will laugh at its tears, and they will kill it without pity!—without pity!"

"It is a fact," said M. Secherin almost moved, "that the poor beasts do weep at the moment of their death. But hearken, cousin, it is said, also, that before dying, the stags sometimes defend themselves bravely; and that even in death the victim has at least the pleasure of avenging itself."

In my absence of mind, replying to my own thoughts in place of answering to M. Secherin, I dried up my tears, looked fixedly at him, and said to him with a bitter smile: "Oh! is it not so? Vengeance! vengeance! not to die feeble, despised, mocked, insulted! in our turn to make those shed tears who have laughed at our sorrows, oh! is it not so? Vengeance! vengeance! above everything! To punish insult; cowardly and miserable insult; insult which they know will go unpunished—which they expect to go unpunished, because honour and the loftiness of a noble heart forbids an ignoble accusation. Oh! but there must be an end to this! is it not so? Yes! you are right, vengeance!"

"Why! mercy! cousin;" exclaimed M. Secherin, with difficulty repressing his inclination to laugh. "How! would you then insult a stag, so that he should think of avenging himself?"

I looked at M. Secherin; at first I did not understand him, but very soon I came to myself, and said, "Forgive me, my dear cousin, in truth, I was mad; you are right, my sensibility got the better of me."

"Just as I thought; my cousin was speaking of this poor stag as of a human being. But, come; we are going to move on again. Do you not hear the noise of a horn? Surely, this hunting is a pleasure for a king!"

The carriage moved on. I took advantage of this movement to abandon myself to the most bitter reflections. I pictured to myself Gontran and Ursula close to each other, letting their horses walk slowly, to take breath after a long gallop; traversing perhaps those endless alleys, tapestried with verdure, and covered by the trees tinged with the richest colours of autumn. Happy and loving, they might be enjoying ardently this mild and brilliant day—this royal luxury, this life of fêtes—thinking of a future more intoxicating still, whispering to each other the tender words of love, and exchanging long and burning looks. Perhaps even—the forest is so thick and retired—Gontran might be leaning toward Ursula; he might embrace her supple figure with his amorous arm, and breathe upon her glowing cheek, still animated by exercise.

"Oh, rage! oh, grief! oh, torture!" thought I; and I—I—am here, broken, jaded, forgotten, mocked—for they mock, they laugh at me—at me, who am riding in peace with the husband whom they deceive and outrage! And it is I—it is I, who gave to this man, poor and almost dishonoured, the chateau in which he makes love to my rival; the luxury with which he dazzles her, the pleasures with which he intoxicates her! Oh! but this is frightful! frightful! This cannot last. I am weary with being stupidly wretched, and I will be so no longer! Here, I have by my side this husband, so good and so honourable, whom they scoff at, whom they outrage. Let me enlighten him. It would not be alone to denounce perfidy and corruption; it would be to prevent honour and loyalty itself from being longer duped by treason." Once again the fatal avowal came to my lips, and once again I recoiled from the declaration.

At the end of half an hour, Gontran sent one of his people to tell us, that the stag had been taken in a pond, but that the road to it was so bad, that carriages could not pass; he begged us to return to the chateau, where he would rejoin us with Madame Secherin. We arrived at Maran, whither we preceded Ursula and Gontran only a few minutes. After changing our dresses for dinner, were-entered the drawing-room. I found there my cousin, her husband, and Gontran. At table, the conversation turned upon the day's hunt. Gontran praised, in the highest terms, the courage and address of

Ursula; who declared, that she had never known such exquisite enjoyment. My cousin was much gayer than the evening before; she seemed to concern herself but little to preserve, in my eyes, her air of melancholy. She accepted readily some toasts to my health that Gontran proposed, and drank, without much pressing, several glasses of champagne, to the great admiration of M. Secherin; who continued to exclaim, "My wife is a very devil!"

For the first time, in noticing the animation, the gaity, and the excitement of my cousin, I felt convinced how much there was in her nature, bold and indomitable! Up to this time, she had appeared to me to be playing a deep part. Her audacious falsehoods had always been enveloped in hypocritical forms; and it was, while raising to Heaven her blue eyes bathed with tears in the most melancholy manner, that she disproved proof itself. But seeing her at table so joyous, so resolute—and in hearing her sallies, so quick, so unexpected, and often so happy, I felt that she was more dangerous than ever.

My husband did not conceal the admiration which she inspired. A sort of contest of wit took place between herself and him, in which Gontran was often foiled. He seemed almost fascinated, and overruled by the superior power of that woman, who several times struck him dumb by a word of biting irony. It will appear strange and incredible, but I absolutely suffered from the kind of mocking superiority with which Ursula replied to my husband.

I was almost confounded with surprise at seeing this transformation in my cousin. M. Secherin himself remarked to me in a low tone, that he had never given his wife credit for so much wit.

Now let me explain this change. There are certain natures which are never completely revealed, until they find themselves exactly in their own place. Thus was Ursula essentially born for a life of luxury, of splendour, of fêtes, and of unbridled pleasures. A century sooner, she would have been one of those clever and abandoned women, who were the queens of the orgies of the regency. For the first time, perhaps, since her marriage, she found herself in a position analogous to her tastes; and doubtless her real character developed itself without her being aware of it. After dinner, the quartering of the stag was to take place by torch-light in the court-yard of the chateau, Gontran having deferred this bloody spectacle in honour of Madame Secherin.

About nine o'clock, the prickers sounded the call. We went out upon the terrace that overlooked the principal court, and which lies before the windows of the room which we had just quitted. The torches, carried by footmen, in full livery, threw a crimson light upon the buildings, of which one portion was completely in shade. This seemed ominous to me. The pack of hounds, hungry, impatient, and scarcely restrained by the whips of the huntsmen, bayed ferociously; their fierce eyes gleaming in the obscurity. In the middle of the court, the head-pricker of M. de Lancry, having withdrawn the skin of the stag from the offal and bones of the animal, took the head by the horns, and shook it rapidly before the dogs. Still restrained, the pack uttered ferocious howlings, until the moment when they were allowed to throw themselves upon the bloody remains, while the horns were loudly sounded. Then began a fierce contest among those eighty dogs, rushing one upon the other, growling, biting, disputing, and tearing the bloody morsels of the stag. This spectacle and noise disgusted me; I re-entered the saloon, the windows of which looked upon the terrace. M. Secherin had gone down to see the quartering more closely. I felt myself overcome—more than ever overcome, by a pain entirely physical; and, for the first time, I asked myself what could be the cause of it.

I threw myself upon a chair, placed near a window, that was half-hidden by curtains. I was mechanically watching the light from the last torches flicker and go out—for the quartering was ended—when I saw Ursula and Gontran stop for an instant before the window. Gontran encircled the waist of Ursula with one of his arms, and approached his lips to my cousin's cheek, in spite of a slight resistance that she offered. Never shall I forget what I experienced at that moment! for, by a strange fatality, the most fearful pang that I had ever felt, revealed to me, so to say, the most intense delight that I had ever known. I know not how it happened, that the shock which I received, was so violent,—and that yet, at the same instant a strange sensation, which went directly to my heart, cleared up at once the cause of my late uneasiness. I felt that I was about to be a mother! This double effect of intoxicating delight, and of overpowering evil, was so strong, that, for a moment, I believed that my head was wandering.

In my delirium, I got up mechanically—I ran through the saloon—I shut myself in my chamber, and throwing myself upon my knees, I could only give utterance to these words:

"Oh! God! thou hast heard me! Henceforward, I can no more be miserable. At the moment that I was about to die of grief, thou hast sent me a hope ineffable."

I had not noticed Blondeau, who was in my alcove.

"Good Heavens!—what is the matter, madam?" cried she.

Without answering her, I pointed to my room door, and said, "I would be alone. Shut the door—leave me—go, and say that I would be alone.

Blondeau went out, and infoimed M. de Lancry that I was disposed, and that I wished to be alone.

In fact, I remained alone to meditate.

I could no longer doubt the infidelity of my husband—and, I was a mother!

END OF PART II

MATILDA.

PART III.

CHAPTER I.

A MOTHER.

NEVER shall I forget the overwhelming emotions of that night—a night, which I passed in a sort of rational delirium—if such an expression may be used. Sometimes I walked, with long steps, across my chamber; sometimes I stopped suddenly, to kneel and pray with fervour; then I gave up to bursts of silly joy—notions of boundless happiness, and calm and majestic pride. I was a mother! I was a mother! At this intoxicating thought, fits of idolatrous tenderness came over me, toward the being I carried in my bosom. I could not believe such happiness to be real! I pressed my hands closely to my bosom, to assure myself that I was actually alive. It seemed to me, that every pulsation of my heart was answered by another, soft and light, that came from the heart of my child. My child! my child! I could not allow myself to pronounce these blessed and charming words. In my high-wrought enthusiasm, I called it, I devoured it with caresses—I was almost out of my senses. I kissed my hands—I laughed at these puerile demonstrations, and, an instant afterward, I was drowned in tears: but such tears were worth the shedding.

It was, I believe, two or three o'clock in the morning. It seemed to me that my happiness required air and space; and that I was anxious to stand face to face with Heaven, the better to express to God my religious gratitude. I opened my window: it was the end of autumn; the night was as fine and as pure, as the day had been radiant; there was not the slightest noise to be heard, all was shady and mysterious; the depths of the firmament were sown with millions of shining stars. The moon rose behind a hill covered with great woods; all was bathed in its clear light—the meadows, the forest, the prairie, and the castle.

Suddenly, a gentle breeze sprung up, increasing and increasing in strength, and passing through the air like a heavy sigh—then all was silent as before. I read an omen in this remarkable murmur which troubled the solitude for a moment, and made the calm that succeeded it more profound than ever. It appeared to me, that my last sorrow had left my heart; and that, thenceforth, my life would flow on in happiness and peace. Enjoying for the first time, the proud consciousness of being a mother, and of living in a state of double existence, I supposed that my trials were for ever past. I blushed at the idea that I had annoyed myself with grievances which could affect me alone.

In recalling the fatal intoxication of this evening, on which I learned both the certainty of Gontran's infidelity, and the fact that I was a mother, I was astonished at the deep serenity that took the place of heart-rending emotions, which, until then, had cruelly disturbed me. I could entertain no doubt that Gontran had deceived me; yet I felt towards him an infinite clemency, and a boundless indulgence. My husband had yielded to a transient taste; this was a weakness—a fault; but he was the father of my child: and it was to him I owed the new and heavenly sensations which I now enjoyed. These thoughts aroused in my soul an inexpressible tenderness and devotion; and respect, and gratitude, which left me neither inclination nor courage to accuse Gontran of his past errors. As for the future, oh! I had no solicitude about the future then! The revelation which I was about to make to my husband, assured me—I shall not say of his love, his anxious attentions, his warm interest, but of a tender, religious veneration, which would be permanent. Yes, this was more than a hope, more than a mere presentiment, which guaranteed me a future, compared with which those few days of happiness passed at Chantilly, and always so regretted, would appear even tasteless and cold. Yes; I had a profound, absolute, and clear trust in my future happiness, which had its source in the most sacred part of my inner feeling. At this moment, when God was blessing and consecrating my love, to doubt concerning the future would have beeen to blaspheme.

From that time, I felt for Ursula a sort of compassionate disdain—of protecting pity. I could no longer honour her with my jealousy; I could not condescend even to hate her. Moving in a sphere so elevated, I had such a conviction of my immense superiority over Ursula, that it seemed impossible to institute the least comparison between her and myself. For the first time, for many a long day, a smile came to my lips, when remembering that I had formerly envied the grace with which she mounted on horseback; and that I had also been jealous of her brilliant wit. At this recollection, I involuntarily shrugged my shoulders. In my lofty and generous pride, I took pity upon this poor woman, who, after all, perhaps, was unable to resist the tenderness with which she regarded Gontran—a tenderness of which I myself knew the irresistible power.

Heavens! I said to myself, what an awakening she will have after this dream of a few days! Then I recalled our infancy, our childhood, and our former friendship. Happiness makes us so compassionate, that I was actually concerned for my cousin. I resolved to request my husband to tell her, with as much delicacy as possible, that she could not remain with us any longer. I would not abuse my triumph by cruelty.

It would be impossible for me to explain the complete revolution which maternity had effected in my most trifling thoughts. Grave ideas, serious almost to severity, had grown up within me, even in the space of a night; as if God had prepared the spirit and heart of the mother, for the celestial duties which devolved upon her in relation to her child. Although, until then, I had been feeble, timid, and resigned; I suddenly felt myself strong, resolute, and courageous: the hand of God sustained me. An entirely new horizon presented itself before me; the limits of my existence seemed to be evinced by the infinite hopes which belonged to me as a mother. In the simple words—to bring up my child—there was a world of new sensations. By and by the day appeared. My first proceeding was to inform my husband of the truth, and, by this unexpected avowal, to change his coldness into adoration: then I thought of temporizing a little, and delaying the moment of my triumph, that I might relish it the more. I experienced a sort of joy in saying to myself, "By one word I can make Gontran more passionately in love with me than he has ever been; yes, Gontran, who yesterday forgot me for another woman!" Confident with regard to what would happen, I gratified myself by summoning up the remembrance of my most unhappy days. I behaved like people who, being miraculously delivered from some great danger, contemplate for the last time, with mingled joy and terror, the gulf which might have swallowed them, or the rock on which they might have split.

A deep and refreshing sleep surprised me in the midst of these thoughts. I awoke slowly. I found my poor Blondeau at my pillow, very much disturbed and sad; my griefs had not escaped her notice: but, however great my confidence in her may have been, I never went so far as to accuse Gontran in her presence. My countenance was radiant with joy too bright to be natural; and Blondeau, when she saw me, cried out in surprise:

"Bless me! madam, what can have made you so happy? Yesterday I left you so much depressed, that I passed the whole night in tears and prayer."

"Something has happened, my good Blondeau, which will make you too become foolish with joy when you know it. But go, quickly, and find M. de Lancry: go!"

"The viscount has already sent me to inquire for you, madam; and so have Monsieur and Madame Secherin. I said that you had passed a very miserable night: monsieur seemed distressed."

"Well, go—go quickly! and find him. I shall dispel his fears."

Blondeau went. Expecting every moment to see Gontran approach, my heart beat more and more strongly; I was greatly agitated. My husband appeared. I threw myself into his arms, drowned in tears, and without being able to speak a word.

Gontran was deceived he took my tears for tears of sorrow. Believing, doubtless, that I had seen him embrace Ursula. and that I was in despair, he spoke to me with embarrassment.

The Mother.

"Put no faith in appearances, I pray you; do not weep, do not!"

"But it is for joy that I am weeping, Gontran! it is for joy! Look at me well; was I crying?"

"Indeed!" replied my husband, "there is a smile, an air of expanded happiness over your features. What does this mean, Matilda?"

"It means that I know all, and that I pardon all you have done. Yes, my beloved Gontran; yes, yesterday, upon the balcony I saw your arm encircle Ursula's waist; I saw your lips kiss her cheek. Well, I pardon you; do you hear? I pardon you, because you will accuse yourself more bitterly than ever I would have done; because you will always, upon your knees, upon both your knees, say to me: pardon, pardon!"

"But hear me, Matilda!"

"Do you not understand me, Gontran? Do you not divine what I say? No? you look at me with terror; you suppose that I jest; perhaps, that I am mad? But in my turn, I ask pardon; and pardon, also, of thee, oh God! for it is a sin not to speak of such happiness with a severe gravity. Gontran!" cried I, taking my husband's hand; "kneel with me; God has blessed our union; I am a mother!"

Oh! I was not deceived in my expectation! Gontran's features expressed the sweetest surprise, the deepest joy. There was a moment of silence; he caught me in his arms with the most lively tenderness. Tears—tears—the only tears that I had seen him shed, flowed from his eyes; he looked at me with love, with adoration—nay, even with respect!

"Oh!" cried he, taking my two hands in his, "you are right, Matilda; it is upon my knees! upon both my knees, that I come to ask your pardon. Noble woman! generous heart! angelic creature! And I have offended you?—you, who were always so resigned, so mild. Oh! once more, pardon! pardon!"

"Did I not tell you, Gontran, my well-beloved, that you would ask my pardon? But alas! I feel that I cannot grant it. I should then be obliged to remember the offence; but, in truth, I have forgotten it."

"Oh! Matilda! Matilda! I have been very much to blame!" cried Gontran, bending his head mournfully; "but, believe me it has been owing to levity and want of thought; my heart—my love—my veneration were with you—always with you! Now, new duties dictate a new line of conduct; you shall see; oh! you shall see, my love, how worthy I,shall be of the happiness that has come to us. How sacred you will be to me, Matilda! Matilda!" added he, kissing my hands with enthusiasm; "oh! how this moment enlightens me! I have never, till now, felt your value; and how unworthy I have been of such a wife! I swear to you Matilda, I love you now more passionately, perhaps, than during those fine days at Chantilly, which you always look back upon with wishes for their return, poor woman! Now I say, as you do—if you cannot pardon my offence, because you have forgotten it, I cannot ask pardon, because I cannot believe it possible that I have ever offended."

"Oh! Gontran! Gontran! what a heart you have! what language. How grateful I am to you! Oh! my God! give me strength to bear such overwhelming happiness!"

"Yes, yes, Matilda; I, your friend, your lover, have not changed; but, thanks to you, I was myself, so happy, that I did not think of the happiness which I ought continually to confer upon you, just as we do not think of thanking God for life when it flows smoothly on. And then, if I was sometimes whimsical and capricious, you ought to have found fault with me, my good angel, my well-beloved; yes, I was like a spoiled child, whom its mother, from her extreme tenderness, never chided. For the greatest faults she has only smiles and sweet remonstrances, and then——No," he continued, with a touching grace, "no, I do not wish to excuse myself, to soften my errors; it would be wicked. I am too egotistical, too stern, too indifferent, too faithless, —that is, *I have been;* I have for some time only half known the most adorable character existing in the world. Oh! Matilda, I do not fear to paint the past in dark colors; the future will be bright."

"Speak no more of this, Gontran; let us speak of it—our child. What will be your plans? What joy! What felicity! If it be a boy, how handsome he will be: if it be a girl, she shall be a beauty. He shall have your eyes; she shall have your smile; and such beautiful brown hair, cheeks so rosy, a neck so white, and little dimpled shoulders. Oh! Gontran, I rave—I am crazy. I never expect all this to be realized."

"Tell me," replied he tenderly, "which do you prefer, to stay here for some time, or go and establish ourselves in Paris? Speak, Matilda, command me; I have now no will of my own."

"Now is the very time my husband, when you must have a will for yourself and for me: for I am going to be wholly absorbed in a single thought; my child. Beyond this idea, I shall be good for nothing."

Since then you leave me at liberty to do so, I shall reflect upon the best course, my good Matildā; and I shall tell you my decision,"

What you do will be done well, my husband; among other considerations, will there not be these? Will you not consult economy? for now we must be prudent. We are no longer alone; we must think from this moment of saving money for our dear child; and at the present time money is so much esteemed, that the possession of it increases the chance of happiness. Let us see, my husband, how can we reduce our establishment?"

"Let us think of that Matilda; you are right. What happiness to exchange frivolous and useless luxury for a touching foresight in behalf of the being who is dearer to us than the world. Oh! never could riches confer such happiness!"

"Hold! my husband, when I think that every one of my privations would increase the well-being of my infant,—I am afraid of becoming avaricious."

"Dear and tender wife, be at rest. I feel as you do all the duties that are now imposed on us. I shall attend to each of them. Like you, Matilda, I have undergone a change," added Gontran, with an accent of inimitable grace and tenderness.

My husband then spoke sincerely; I knew his countenance too well, to mistake the touching expression of truthfulness with which it was invested. When he expressed to me his regret at having annoyed and distressed me, he spoke the truth: the hardest heart, the most pitiless characters, have often excellent seasons of repentance. For this strong reason, Gontran was capable of being generous, because he was not wicked; he was spoiled by too much admiration. Indeed, I am certain that my husband then felt towards me as at the moment of our marriage. So strong was I in the conviction, it seemed to me so natural that the passing regard which my husband entertained for Ursula, should be dissipated suddenly, by the revelation which I had made to him; that without the least hesitation, without the least embarrassment, I said to Gontran:

"Now, my husband, how are we to get rid of Ursula?" At this ingenuous question, Gontran looked at me, blushing with surprise. "It surprises you to hear me speak thus of my cousin," said I, smiling; "yet nothing is more simple. I do not retain any animosity, any jealousy: I have no time for that; I am too happy! She has played the coquette with you—you have been favorably impressed by her attentions; I forgive all that. This arises from the giddiness of youth, which you will now remember, my tender friend: I desire only that you, who have so much tact and wit, would find some means of removing Ursula, without hurting her feelings by any severity of language or manner; for, in spite of me, I cannot refrain from pitying her: some time, perhaps, she might chance to believe that you love her."

Gontran looked at me in silence: he seemed scarcely to believe what he heard After a brief interval, he cried:

"Always great! always generous; Ah! I would be the most guilty of men, if I were ever to forget your conduct in this affair. Yes, you are right, Matilda, I shall expiate these youthful follies as I ought. Your cousin must go—and go as soon as possible; not that I doubt my resolution, but because the sight of her will become painful to you as soon as your enthusiasm is gone!"

"You speak truly, my husband; you know me better than I know myself. If you knew what I have suffered on her account—but hold, Gontran, let us speak no more of that, all is forgotten. It will be very easy for Ursula to persuade her husband to leave Maran: he has no will but hers. But," I added, with some hesitation, "how will you be able to lead Ursula to this resolution.?"

"Nothing can be more simple. I will tell her all, with frankness and candor."

"You will tell her——"

"I will tell her that she and I have been foolish; that we have run grave risks; that she has endangered the tranquillity of the best of men; that I have endangered the peace of the most tender and adorable of women, I will tell her that our imprudence has alarmed you; that for nothing in the world would I cause you the slightest annoyance; in short, I will request her to persuade her husband to leave the place."

For a moment I preserved silence; in spite of my faith in Gontran's love, and in my superiority over Ursula, it was painful to think that my husband was to have another secret interview with my cousin. Alas! at this thought, all my feeling of jealousy returned. I said to Gontran with emotion "Must you then ask an interview with Ursula, in order to persuade her to depart?"

"Doubtless,"

"Well, I confess to you, Gontran, the idea seems a cruel one to me."

"Then," replied he smiling, "I must have more courage than you. How can it be done otherwise, my poor Matilda."

"I know not."

'I dare not propose, that you, yourself, should speak on the subject to your cousin."

"No; that would be awkward, I feel that it would. Such a reommendation from me, would humble her, bitterly: and I cannot forget that she has been my friend—my sister."

"What is to be done, then? I would write to her, but that is dangerous and, then, there are a thousand things that can be said, that cannot be written; there are objections, which a *viva voce* conference can settle; although they might remain as valid as ever, after a long correspondence."

After musing for some time, Gontran exclaimed, all radiant with joy: "Oh, Matilda, Matilda! what a capital idea! Would you have a double proof of my fidelity, and of my anxiety to make you forget the annoyance, of which I have been the cause?"

"How is it to be given?"

"Concealed somewhere, where you can see and hear everything, be a witness to the interview, at which your jealousy is alarmed."

"Gontran, what do you say? Ah! this proves——"

"Nothing that ought to alarm you. For the last time, Matilda, my beloved angel, I wish to tell you all, and trust you with all: to be as candid as you are generous. Pardon me if I shock you. I shall take courage; for this frank avowal will put an end, I am sure, to your exaggerated fears: you shall see, that I have been more imprudent and thoughtless than guilty. You shall see, that if Ursula has been coquettish with me; that if on my side I have transgressed the bounds of common gallantry, she has not to blush for a grave and irreparable fault. Yesterday I did by way of pleasantry, throw my arm round her waist, and I attempted to embrace her; this was a degree of levity, deserving of blame, I am aware; but she might, perhaps excuse it on the score of relationship."

"And at Rouvray, Gontran?"

"At Rouvray, as here, I paid Ursula such compliments as are addressed to all women. I said to her, that she was charming; that it would give us much pleasure, if she could pay us a long visit. She received these gallantries coquettishly, but in a laughing way, and without thinking more seriously about the matter than its insignificance deserved, I assure you. This is all the confession. Matilda, pardon! again, I say, pardon!"

"I thank you rather for an avowal, which completes my confidence. It is far better to know the truth, however painful it may be, than to be worried by phantoms, often more alarming than realities."

"Moreover, Matilda, I now swear to you, upon my honour, by all that is dearest to me in the world—in short, by yourself! that during this interview I shall approach your cousin with a heart full of you, of your goodness, of your generosity; that I shall not utter a word without thinking of the tears I have made you shed, noble and angelic creature that you are! I swear to you, that this passing fancy, which I have confessed to you, has vanished before the interests which now binds us in bonds more firmly than ever. Matilda, Matilda, I would be the worst of men, if the condition in which you now are, did not secure for you my most devoted attentions! Trust me; do not object to our present plan. I am proud to know, at least how to expiate the faults which I have committed!"

"Oh, I believe you, I believe you! My well-beloved Gontran. I leave myself to your guidance; yes, I shall have courage for this trial."

"Thanks, oh, thanks, Matilda, for permitting me to justify myself thus But I do not wish you to have the least doubt: love is suspicious, I know. In spite of you, there may, perhaps, be some lingering thought that I have yielded to Ursula, and that——"

"Ah, Gontran, you judge me too harshly!"

"No, no, my poor Matilda, leave me to settle it. The more candid, open and unsuspected, my explanation appears, the better you will be satisfied. Hear me, then. Tell Blondeau to ask your cousin to come here. You will say in the cabinet in your recess; this glass-door between us, a fold of the curtain raised, you can see and hear everything. Your cousin will come; I shall tell her that you have gone out, that you wish her to excuse you, and to meet you in the park pavilion. For some minutes I shall retain her here; then she will go out to search for you, and you can leave your hiding-place."

"Then I will fall upon my knees, Gontran; and I will thank you a thousand times for having restored to me in one day, the happiness which I believed I had lost for ever."

Then, as my husband requested, Blondeau went to seek Ursula. I entered one of the cabinets in the recess, with a beating heart. Gontran's tender assurances, his candour—all tended to prevent me from having the least fear-and yet for a moment, I hesitated. It seemed to me, that I played an unworthy part, in thus witnessing the interview without being seen. I confess that my irresolution vanished less in the hope of seeing my rival humbled, than in the ardent and restless desire of witnessing a scene so strange—so new, to a woman.

I heard the plaintive and melancholy tone of Ursula; I waited to see her drowned in tears when my husband should disclose to her his intention. Judging of the love she must have felt for Gontran, by the love which I felt for him myself, I foresaw that this scene would be a cruel one for my cousin. Whether from weakness or generosity, I could not help pitying her. I was even afraid that Gontran, moved by my secret presence, would be too severe toward her. What a revelation for this poor unfortunate woman who loved him so much, and who certainly believed herself as well beloved in return! Even at this hour I am convinced that my husband was then sincere in his determination to sacrifice a passing caprice to the holy and serious affection which I deserved as his wife. A single fear harassed me: Ursula was so cunning, so adroit; she knew how to give her voice, and her very tears a power so seductive, that, perhaps, my husband's resolution might not be able to withstand her touching grief.

These reflections occurred to me more rapidly than ordinary thoughts. I waited to hear the light steps of Ursula: they were audible. I then retired to my hiding-place.

CHAPTER II.

THE INTERVIEW.

Ursula appeared surprised at not seeing me, as she entered my chamber. Her countenance was smiling and gay; Gontran's expression on the contrary, was cold and reserved. He stood near the chimney corner, and leaned upon it.

Ursula, shutting the door, said to him, "How came you here? Where is Matilda?"

"She was obliged to go down for an instant, to attend to the solicitations of one of her poor pensioners: she begs you to excuse her; and she wishes you to join her directly in the park-pavilion."

Ursula at first appeared astonished at the cold reception my husband gave her; then she smiled, making him a profound bow, with an ironical air, as she said; "I thank you, sir, for having informed me where I may meet the Viscountess de Lancry; I am sorry to have interrupted your grave meditations." Ursula made a step toward the door.

"One word, I pray you," said Gontran.

Ursula, who was leaving the room, stopped; and turning her head round slowly, cast upon Gontran a long look, full of malice and coquetry, and raised her pretty finger with a threatening air, as she said to him; "Let it be one word, then; no more! I know how dangerous it is to listen to you—more so, perhaps, than it is to look at you. Let us see! quickly! this word, my handsome, my gloomy cousin."

"What I have to say to you, madam, is grave and serious."

"Indeed! sir, is it grave and serious? Well, I am delighted: it will contrast with your folly and habitual giddiness. Let us see—speak, I am listening."

"When I saw you at Rouvray," said Gontran, "two months ago, I could not conceal from you the fact, that I thought you a charming woman."

"That is very true, dear cousin; and I remember, that in a certain elm-tree avenue, you even made me a proposal—and an exceedingly impertinent one, to which I replied as I ought—by laughing at you. Let us see—go on—your gravity, sententious and ceremonious as it is, amuses and puzzles me infinitely. What are you coming to?"

Gontran cast a glance of satisfaction toward the cabinet-door, where I was hid, and replied: "On your arrival here, I told you what great pleasure it gave me to see you again."

"What *happiness*, my dear, handsome, cousin—what *happiness*, if you please;—your little words, alas! are engraved here in characters that cannot be effaced," said **Ursula,** pressing her hand upon her heart and looking at my husband ironically.

Gontran appeared almost thwarted by this sarcasm; knitting his brows slightly, he proceeded, with a firm tone: "I am delighted, madam, that you are in a pleasant mood; the task I have to accomplish, will be less arduous."

"Let us see: quick—quick! I am on burning coals, my dear cousin; I burn to know the end of all this, and what good will result from this solemn recapitulation of our —— what shall I call this intimacy of ours? Love? No, indeed! you have far too little to inspire me with such a sentiment; let us, then, call it *coquetry*—that, I believe, is the word. Am I right?"

"Let it be so, madam," replied Gontran, "I shall continue, then, the recapitulation of our —— of our coquetry. On your arrival at Maran, I told you what happiness I enjoyed at seeing you again, and how much I desired that your stay here might be prolonged."

"That is very true, sweet cousin; but yesterday we planned a charming hunting party; you grumbled a little—very tenderly it is true—because I seemed to prefer the noise of trumpets, to your amorous declarations; and I confess, to my shame, that I deserved your reproaches; for me, there was nothing more ravishing—more novel especially, than the trumpet-clang which resounded through the woods."

"And doubtless a declaration had not for you the same charm of novelty. The avowal is ingenuous" said Gontran, smiling.

Ursula looked fixedly at my husband, and with a gesture which indicated haughty pride, shook her bold forehead and waved the long masses of her brown air She then replied with a smile which conveyed irony, if not scorn, "My dear cousin, I am scarcely eighteen, and I have often been told that I am charming. You will pardon me, then, for being surfeited with declarations. For a long time, my ear has been accustomed to the chirping of vulgar flattery! and, unhappily, you have not awaked in my soul sensations as little known as they are ravishing. I have no doubt but you are an excellent Pygmalion; yet Galatea was accustomed to restraint, as well as spirited action, before your all-powerful glance condescended to fall upon a poor provincial like me."

My astonishment was at its height. It was Ursula who thus expressed herself—she who had been formerly so tearful, always speaking of her early grave. It was Ursula who spoke to Gontran in this contemptuous language—to him, whose conquests had been so numerous—to him, the most select of gentlemen—to him, who was adored by the most fashionable of women, Gontran appeared to be not less surprised than myself at this bantering language. Nevertheless, I saw, with joy, that he had not deceived me. He had been light and imprudent in Ursula's presence, but he had been preserved from any sentiment more deeply seated than the cold coquetry of my cousin.

Ursula resumed, in the same tone of irony: "What is the matter, my dear cousin? you seem abashed"

"It is, madam, because I have never seen you so scornful."

"That, sir, is because I have never seen you so solemn."

"You are right," said Gontran, smiling; we are talking of follies and gallantries of no consequence, exchanged between a man and woman of the world; and I assume indeed, an air of authority quite ridiculous. Well, then my pretty cousin, you remember that yesterday morning I had so little control over myself as to embrace your elegant figure, and imprint a kiss upon your fresh and rosy cheek. Well, I come to ask your forgiveness for this boldness—to ask you to forget this folly. I yielded to a transient enthusiasm. I had, for the moment, confounded the familiarity of a relative with a sentiment more tender, and I come——"

Ursula interrupted my husband by a burst of laughter, and exclaimed:

"You come to ask my pardon; but there is, indeed, no cause, my dear cousin; your virtuous candour has given you a false alarm. I swear to you, your audacity has been very innocent: for your mouth kissed not this 'fresh and rosy cheek,' but the trimming of my bonnet. As for the 'charming figure' you embraced, a little against my inclination, the first gentleman who waltzes with me shall, of course, be entitled to the same privilege in the ball-room. I cannot see that you received any encouragement, which ought to cause you remorse, on account of the manner in which you received it last evening. I did not play the offended prude, because it would have shown bad taste. In such a case, the best course for an honest woman is, to be resigned and silent."

Of course, Gontran's love was wounded by this railery; for, forgetting my presence, he cried with vexation, "How! madam; your silence was that of indignation—indifference!"

Here, my dear cousin, let me recall, alas! even the minute details of the sad consequences of your audacity"

"Where were they?"

"I had my hand upon the rails of the balcony, and, in drawing it back, I tore the lace off my handkerchief."

"That proves," said Gontran, with impatience, "that you have an excellent memory, madam."

"It does not prove anything in favour of my memory, cousin; but it proves the angelic purity of my sentiments, to which you will oblige me by giving your consideration."

"Madam."

"Doubtless Let us see! seriously, if my silence had been that of excitement—if I had loved you—should I have remarked that circumstance about the handkerchief? Should I have waited until your lips kissed my cheeks, and until your arm pressed my waist, in order to be satisfied with regard to one of those sudden, silent, and profound emotions which intoxicate women and lead men astray? Ah! mercy! scarcely would your hand have touched mine, when a sensation—electric, rapid as lightning—would have overturned my reason and my senses! Almost without knowing it, without thinking it, spite of myself, I should have fallen into your arms; and I should have awaked without remembering anything—but still fainting, under a delirious and inexplicable emotion, which no language can possibly convey."

Oh! misery! misery! never shall I forget the tone of emotion with which Ursula uttered these last words—never shall I forget the blush which, for an instant, lighted up her countenance, like the reflection of a crimson light—never shall I forget the look, at the same time vague, burning and voluptuous, which she raised to Heaven, as if she felt what she attempted to describe! Misery! misery!—never shall I forget with what ardent admiration Gontran looked at her for some minutes—for she was beautiful, oh! very beautiful Her beauty was certainly not chaste and pure; but sensual—such beauty, in fact, as is said to exercise a sway over man. Misery! misery! I saw in Gontran's features grief and anger. He was evidently on the brink of a precipice. He was in despair because he had not inspired Ursula with the sentiments which she so eloquently described. My terror of this woman increased: I was on the point of leaving my hiding-place to break up the interview; but carried away by an eager curiosity, and an anxiety to hear Gontran's reply, I remained motionless.

My husband appeared to be fascinated by Ursula's look; he then continued, in a bitter tone: "Indeed, madam, your theory is a complete one: happy the man who shall put it into practice. I am glad to find from what you have said, that I have been less faithless to my wife than I supposed. I sincerely congratulate myself; while, at the same time, I thank you for having openly indulged in a little coquetry with me."

Ursula burst into a new fit of laughter, and replied: "Heavens with what a downcast and solemn air you speak to me of conjugal fidelity! One would suppose you experienced remorse for a good action, and that you were sorry at not finding yourself more guilty."

"True, my dear cousin, I did believe myself less innocent; and I also supposed that you were more ingenuous."

"Hold! you are decidedly in a fury."

"No, you are mistaken: I swear you are."

"I say you are in a perfect fury! Ah! my dear cousin, you supposed that you were making a conquest, because you seemed to succeed in gratifying my fancies. I presume—indeed, I am sure," she added, laughing more violently than ever, "that you believed me mortally smitten before my marriage; then again on your presentation to Matilda, and subsequently, on your visit to Rouvray; and you of course imagined that I had but one aim, one thought—the idea of rejoining you here or at Paris. You were, moreover, probably under the impression, that, in order to pay my addresses to you, and obtain the happiness of long interviews, I bravely learned to ride on horseback at the risk of breaking my neck—and all to render myself worthy of a look from you, or induce you to exclaim inwardly: 'Poor little thing! what devotion! what courage Ah! these women! these women! When one of these devils resolves to fascinate, she invariably succeeds!' As for that matter, my poor cousin, you are not entirely wrong; for I believe I have completely fascinated you, although I have not thought proper to exert my power."

"I see that there are others who may be charged with vanity as well as myself," said Gontran, his annoyance evidently increasing.

"How!" resumed Ursula, with renewed gaiety, "do you think that there is any vanity in pretending to the conquest of your heart? Such an avowal is indeed amusing, when it comes from one who proposes to instruct me in modesty. Well! I confess, although I am quite conscious of having fascinated you, it is a matter of which I am not in the least proud."

"Then you think that I am very much in love with you?"

"I believe you are more in love with me to-day than you were yesterday and that you will be more in love with me to-morrow than you are to-day."

"And in what is this ever increasing passion to end my charming prophetess?"

"As far as I am concerned, in a hearty laugh. You may, possibly, be thrown into despair. You ought to know this by experience, seigneur Don Juan; if there be a genuine passion on one side, there is usually indifference or contempt on the other.—There is, then, you must perceive, one thing which must for ever prevent me from returning your love, and which does you an irreparable injury in my eyes: that one thing is simply—*your love*."

"You manage a paradox admirably, madam, and you have my admiration."

"What seems to you a paradox is very simple. We are so little accustomed to hear genuine truth that it is apt to appear paradoxical. At the risk, then, of passing for a fool, I tell you that you love me; not only because I am young and pretty, but because your pride and vanity are hurt by the discovery, notwithstanding your former successes, that I do not yield to your powerful attractions."

"Madam," cried Gontran, "pray let us change the subject."

"You are right, cousin, we have wandered from our subject; where were we, then? Ah! yes—you were humbly begging my pardon for having had the audacity to kiss the trimming of my bonnet, and for having taken precisely the same liberty with my person as was accorded to the least remembered of my waltzers during the past year."

Instead of replying to Ursula, Gontran was silent for a moment, and then said, with a constrained smile: "There are doubtless, madam, combined in your character, some very rare qualities: you have certainly a right to be disdainful, if you please; but it is impossible to guess with what unheard-of perfections—with what supreme advantages he must be endowed, who would aspire to the amazing felicity of pleasing you."

"Do you know, my cousin, that you are very fantastical?"

"How is that?"

"This very moment, you earnestly entreated me not to discuss you any more; and here you are beginning to talk about yourself again, in fine style!"

"I? no such thing."

"You ask me, with a most transparent air of irony, what supernatural gifts should be yours, to please me? Is not that equivalent to an intimation, that you do not please me at all—possessed, as you are, of irresistible charms? Well—you perceive, if I answer you, as I did just now, you will reproach me for changing a serious dissertation into amorous speeches."

"No, no: we will resume that conversation. But, tell me—I am curious to know the ideal of whom you dreamed."

"My ideal! and why, my poor cousin? Descriptions of heroes dreamed of by young girls, are always prepared beforehand: they always say just what they do not wish to say, and they admire the exact opposite of their dreams. However, there is a preliminary condition, on which I should positively insist: the man of my choice should be entirely free—in one word, a bachelor."

"And why include married men in these severe ostracisms?"

"First, because I will not condescend to reign over a divided heart; there is always something ridiculous in the behaviour of a married gallant. He is an amphibious being, who partakes of the character of a scholar in vacation, and the father of a rebellious family; then, he is generally so stupid: to me, a married gallant always seems as anomalous to a married priest."

"The portrait, madam, is by no means, flattering," said Gontran, hardly being able to contain himself.

"Yourself, for example," continued Ursula: "yourself, my dear cousin. You have lost all your old attractions; and even [as a bachelor you would be rather too much—a little too much for me; yes, certainly you would. For, after all, what are you—my amiable, very intellectual great lord—with a charming person, and most elegant manners! Between ourselves my love must have either higher or lower aims."

"Indeed; my cousin, to-day you talk in enigmas!"

"Indeed! my cousin, to-day you have very little understanding? It is a fact; I must have either a slave, or a master. You could be neither one nor the other. You have neither that entire devotion which interests, nor that lofty superiority which subdues. For a simple, good, inoffensive creature, for instance, who adored me with the blind worship of a savage for his idol, I should feel a kind of confiding fondness; that sort of affectionate compassion, that one experiences for a trembling, submissive dog, who always keeps his eyes fixed beseechingly on your countenance: who licks the hand that strikes him, and who is always too happy to come back familiarly to lie at your footstool, when, either through anger or caprice you have rudely driven him away? But, if I even should meet with one of those men, who, by I know not what mysterious power, rules one like a despot at the very first glance, with what humble, what tender submission, would I bend before him! With what idolatry, would I, imperious as I am, become in turn the adorer! How would I dedicate my rights, my will; my life even, to him! On my knees, always on my knees before my sovereign, before my divinity! joy, grief, hope, despair, all would emanate from him; to him all would return. That he might only deign to call me his Venus, I would be humble, resigned, abject, sinful; for who knows, who can say, that jealousy in such a love, would not amount to frenzy, to ferocity? Hold! at this thought, oh! at this thought, how I tremble!"

In uttering these last words, with a low voice, Ursula cast down her eyes and appeared meditative.

Gontran was astounded

I was alarmed.

After a few moments' silence, Ursula passed her hand across her brow, as if to chase away the ideas which appeared to have saddened and absorbed her: and, smiling, said to my husband, "You see plainly, then, that you can neither be my slave nor my master. We can only be friends, and even that will be difficult; you are too much a man of the world to pardon me your unlucky declarations and ill success. Taking all these things into consideration, there is but little chance that we shall not be implacable enemies. Do you not think this a very original conclusion? Who would have said our conversation would have taken this turn?"

"Beyond contradiction, madam," maliciously replied Gontran, as if he had not yet recovered from the effect of this strange conversation—"beyond contradiction, that is very original. But may I ask you, why you have chosen to devote so much time to us?"

With that susceptibility to various impressions, which characterized her, she began anew to laugh heartily, as she looked at Gontran with astonishment; and exclaimed:

"Indeed! have you become downright silly? Does your passion for me already disturb your reason? How! do you wish to be the incessant aim and object of my thoughts? You imagine, that my journey here had no other end than to tell you—*I love you*, But, rest assured—that it was never to yourself, but to my dear Matilda, I intended to devote the time I should spend at Maran. Heaven! how strangely you appear! How very singular men are! Had I avowed to you that I had, for a long time, entertained a design of enticing you away from your wife, you would naturally have been very indignant; but now my conduct contradicts all this, and you see me scrupulously respecting the sacred laws of that friendship which you have yourself invoked."

"Madam!"

"Come, come, do not suppose that I wish to make myself out better than I am. My good behaviour is chiefly owing to my dislike of married men in general, and my little *penchant* for you, in particular. I undoubtedly love Matilda, with all my heart; but if an irresistible power had drawn me to you, I should, in spite of myself, have betrayed the confidence of my best friend. Besides," continued Ursula, smiling with that sarcastic expression which imparted to her physiognomy so insolent and disdainful a character, "I offer equal chances of combat; I am likewise vulnerable. I have a husband also; let them entice him from me. It is but fair. But enough of follies like this, my dear cousin. Now let us talk reason. What is it that you have to tell me, and why do you keep me here? Matilda may be impatiently expecting me."

Gontran seemed much provoked at Ursula's raillery: he answered sharply, "It was of Matilda herself that I desired to speak to you. Though I am one of those amphibious beings, so very ridiculous, whom people call husbands, my wife feels for me a deep, sincere, unchangeable affection."

"She is very right, and evinces the best possible taste. I do not carp at husbands as I do at lovers; apart from their pretensions, they are possessed of all sorts of agreeabilities—conjugal ones, I mean; and you, yourself, cousin, have personally all the attractions requisite to please your wife."

"And I desire, madam, to continue to please my wife; and I should be most unhappy to occasion her any violent sorrow: she is young enough, and blind enough, to love me so passionately that she considers my love her life. But as she does not possess that overweening self-confidence which would make her think that people must always worship her; as she is, above all, gifted with the most charming modesty, she dreads certain very dangerous comparisons; and, though I am, I confess it humbly, now sighing under your disdain, yet she much fears——"

Ursula interrupted Gontran. "All these periphrases simply signify that Matilda is jealous of me—do they not? This, then, is the great secret! what fine folly!"

"I have the honor to assure you, madam, that nothing could be more serious. Matilda's repose is, above all things, dear to me."

I am persuaded of it, and you can, it seems to me, appease her better than any one else can, my dear cousin. As for me, I should be wretched to cause her the slightest sorrow, it would be unpardonable; I should have neither the pleasure of remorse nor the remorse of pleasure."

"Unhappily, madam, Matilda has more than suspicions, she has certainty; yesterday, after the game on the terrace, she saw——"

"Saw you kiss my bonnet; this is delightful! I am overjoyed! I have just cause for exercising some slight vengeance upon her, so as to teach her not to trust in appearances. Let us leave her a day or two in her error and when at last we undeceive her, I will say, 'Now you see, naughty cousin, that you must never believe in what you see.'"

"Not undecive Matilda, madam? Why, the poor child will expire. You know not the nobleness, the angelic uprightness of her soul; you know not with how holy a fervor she loves me. Matilda is not one of those coldly sarcastic women, who, because they are themselves destitute of feeling, affect to despise sentiments which they are incapable of conceiving or appreciating. No, no! Matilda is not one of those——"

"Of those abominable women, of those monsters of perfidy, who have the impudence not to desire for a lover the husband of their most intimate friend;" said Ursula, interrupting my husband, and beginning to laugh loudly once more. Gontran seemed in torment; Ursula continued: "Good heavens! How very amusing you are! and how naturally your eulogy of poor Matilda comes in aid of your anger at my insensibility! Nothing was wanting at last, but my disdain, to bring to your lips, you know, the praise of your wife!"

"You are right, madam," said Gontran; almost beside himself with her sarcasms; "I have, perhaps, never better known how to prize her adorable heart, than while discovering——"

"To how terrible a heart, you wish to sacrifice it! Is it that, my dear cousin? I dearly love to finish your sentences, we so perfectly understand one another. Seriously, there is abundant reason for your preferring Matilda to me; first, your marital fidelity will preserve me from your amorous entreaties; and then my cousin is worth a thousand like me. Is she not more beautiful than I am? Are not her excellences as numerous as my faults? Will there not always be a vast distance between us? Is she not, on account of her very devotion, of her virtues, fatally destined to feel the sincerest, the most constant of passions, and never to inspire them? while I! mine, alas! must be the fearful misfortune to inspire——"

"Without ever feeling them! Is it not so, madam?" cried Gontran. "Ah, you are right. In truth, you are an infernal woman, you make even me fear you."

Ursula shrugged her shoulders. "Yes: I am an infernal woman, to those who will neither be my slaves, nor my tyrants, to them, if they are foolish or presumptuous enough to love me, I will be merciless; I will satirize them, I will place them in the most absurd positions, perhaps in the most cruel; according to my caprice! The more obstinately they persisted in their love for me, the more would I make them the subject of my jests."

"Stop, cousin!" said Gontran, to put an end to a conversation which annoyed him; "you display so much vigor of intellect, so much force of character, that I am less and less embarrassed in imparting what I wished to say to you."

"And what is it you have to say to me?"

"Between relations, as between friends, there are certain matters which we can frankly avow. I have told you that Matilda was jealous of you, that she dreaded your presence, and that——" Gontran hesitated.

"And that it would greatly tranquillize her, were I to abridge my sojourn here?"

"Excuse me, cousin, but——"

"Heavens! nothing can be more easily arranged. Why did you not tell me so at once? Poor, dear Matilda! I regret, after all, to leave her so soon; and then I regret your hunting parties, which have entertained me much; perhaps I might have regretted yourself, had you not spoken to me of love. It is a pity, but there is no argument against jealousy. I will allow myself only a a few days for preparation, and to warn my husband of this sudden change of resolution. I will do it; but do you really wish it, my cousin?" said Ursula, cordially extending her hand to Gontran.

"I do not wish it, but I confess to you that I never expected to hear such language, and such ideas from you; I believe that I am dreaming."

Ursula replied with that ironical smile of hers: "For a young woman, who after leaving the hotel de Maran; came to abide at a country house, you think me very strange, do you not? You cannot comprehend it? You do not recognize the poor victim, the strange female, who indited such tearful elegies to poor Matilda, that they made her weep! And she was right; for I wept myself, when I wrote them; and even now I weep at times——"

"You; you weep!"

"Certainly, when the wind is easterly, and there is something in the air which makes you feel, somehow or other, as if you wanted to hang yourself as Mademoiselle de Maran elegantly observes."

"Always changeable, always foolish," said Gontran.

"Am I not a very strange sort of a woman? I talk of everything, without knowing anything; I speak of the emotions of the heart, without feeling them. I have all kinds of moods, without having any fixed one; I am everything by times, and nothing long; I am saucy, jesting, incoherent. Nevertheless, cousin, you do not know that of me, which I desire to leave unknown; in bad things as in good, you are a thousand leagues from the reality. Of this alone can you be certain. I am always what I am determined to be. Thus, for example; I have more expression than beauty, more faults than good qualities, more pertness than wit; I have an ordinary fortune, a ridiculous name, Madame Secherin, Madame Secherin! Well, in spite of all that, I resolve to be this very winter, the woman most courted, the most fashionable in all Paris—to keep the most recherche house, and to turn all heads after having finished your own. Now, farewell, cousin, I shall set about persuading my husband to be off as soon as possible. We will undertake a little journey between this and winter. I will go and rejoin Matilda in the park. I will conceal from her this sapient conversation. Poor woman! I pity her, poor divinity. Alas! when one knows how to speak only the language of angels, one runs a great risk of finding one's self, here below, quite without a parallel. After all, I prefer my lot to hers, although she has the unqualified happiness to have you for her lord and master!" added Ursula with an ironical smile. She went out, making a slight obeisance to Gontran, and with an air of the utmost malice, blew him a kiss from the end of her fingers. And then I heard my cousin, as she retired, singing, in her clear and ringing tones, an air from Der Freyschutz.

CHAPTER III.

FEARS.

If I had for an instant doubted the sudden change that maternity had wrought in my mind, by maturing it all at once, and by revealing to it a new world; the terrors which awoke within me after the conversation of Ursula and my husband, would have been sufficient to convince me of the incredible transformation. If I can be pardoned a common comparison—a wonderful instinct taught the poor mother, who watched over her brood, that the black speck, hardly perceptible on the clear azure of the sky, was the ferocious vulture—its most mortal enemy! So, after the conversation which I have just related, I was conscious of the truth of a new and dreadful calamity, from the very circumstance which ought, so far as appearances went, to have consoled me. My cousin did not love my husband, she even laughed disdainfully, at the gallantries which afflicted me so much. With a revolting effrontery she had shown herself to him as she was—perhaps worse than she was. With a splendid impudence, she had avowed that she could be the abject slave of the man who would subdue her; the haughty mistress of the man who adored her, and an unpitying coquette to those who would not crouch at her knees, or proudly trample her under their feet! She had, moreover, said to Gontran that she could never love him, because the love of a married man was ridiculous—because he loved her; and moreover, twice had she uttered this insolent defiance: *In spite of yourself you will always love me.* Before I was a mother, I would have emerged from my hiding-place, radiant with happiness and confidence; I would have fallen on my knees and exclaimed: "I thank thee, my God, that thou hast caused this perfidious, bold woman, to show herself without disguise—to display all the baseness, all the malice of her soul! For one moment, my husband was won from his allegiance by her seductive beauties; but now he knows her; now he entertains for her no other sentiments than contempt and horror." Any man, and Gontran more than any, must have discovered her revolting pride while she so disdainfully addressed him.

What could Gontran—so handsome, so fascinating; spoiled by so much success, so much adoration—not only love, but be entirely absorbed by, a woman who dared to say to him: "I do not love you, I never will; and yet I defy you not to love me?" Yes: once more would I have blessed God had peace and content taken up their long abode in my heart. But, alas! I have already said that, I know not by what intuition, I had, in one night, acquired mournful wisdom, a despairing certainty of judgment which years alone can impart. I firmly believe that this prescience had been all at once bestowed upon me, that I might be able to guard the future of my child. Alas! I was still young; I had not grown weary of contemplating the woes of the human spirit; I had no supernatural power by which to break the web of dreadful thoughts. I trusted in good even to blindness; I had no idea of those depraved passions which, instead of seeking for what is pure, noble, healthful and attainable, are shamelessly excited by the power of corruption—of impudence—of the unattainable. Could I suspect that a man, because a vain woman had told him, "I do not love you, and I never will love you," would for that very reason, adore that woman to madness? No! no! had I been told that the human heart was capable of these enormities, I should have denied it—I should have deemed it blasphemy! By what mystery, then, could I, until that time so happily ignorant of grief, by what mystery then I guess, how was I conscious—yes, physically conscious, of so dreadful a wound to my heart, as that Gontran at that moment loved this woman? not only more than he had loved his former mistresses, not only more than he loved me—but more than he ever would have loved me? What secret voice warned me that this fatal passion would be the sole, the last passion of his? What voice said to me that the most careless, the most false of men, when they chance to love and, above all, to love without hope a profligate woman love with a frightful intensity? Now did I perceive that Ursula, by her wicked arts, had brought into play my husband's most active passions, by saying to him: "You are handsome, you are accustomed to please; nevertheless, I laugh at you and you still love me; and that love will furnish me with a topic of inexhaustible ridicule, and prove to you an inexhaustible sorrow."

And this was not enough for the woman. As if she desired to kindle and increase Gontran's love by exciting his jealousy, she had chosen to avow to him that she was not always so cold, contemptuous, sarcastic, as she had been to him! And behold! behold! with what passionate ardour she had painted to him the overwhelming emotion, which would extinguish her reason at the bare approach of the man she could love. At these words, uttered, as they were, with a melting and sensual tone, behold! how her eyes were downcast! how her cheeks burned! And when she spoke of the man who would play the tyrant over her, with how humble and submissive a grace she bowed her charming head! How did she seem to kneel before him, with clasped hands, imploring one smile from her master, as she fixed upon him those big, blue eyes, swiming with langour and sadness, and love! Alas nothing more was requisite than the fascination of this powerful, this irresistable woman' to convince me, her rival, me a mother, me who had a horror for such 'as her—that, at that minute, not only Gontran, but any other man, would have been desperately enamoured of Ursula—so potent was the spell of her beauty! No! I had not been deceived by those fearful forebodings! Lonely and feeble being—poor and disconsolate mother that I was—though I could not avoid, I could perhaps conjecture the evils that threatened me.

I nearly fainted, when I left the cabinet in which I had been concealed. I found Gontran seated on a *fauteuil*, his eyes fixed, his arms crossed on his breast, in an attitude of the deepest reflection. I was compelled lightly to touch his shoulder to recall him to himself. He quickly turned his head, and spoke only these words, with a deep and thoughtful expression; "What a woman! Oh! she must begone, Matilda, she must begone!"

These words confirmed my suspicions. In the mouth of Gontran, who was always master of himself, they had a dreadful significance; he either loved that woman, or he feared lest he should love her. An idea, which I at first hailed as a divine inspiration, impelled me to reveal to Gontran what I knew of Ursula's intrigue with M. Chopinelle; who, doubtless had been marked in the category of her slaves. At first I doubted not that vexation, at having failed where so contemptible a person had succeeded, would inspire Gontran with an unconquerable repugnance to Ursula: perhaps he attached so much value to the conquest of Ursula, because he considered himself her first love. I wanted also to inform my husband with what falsehood, with what treachery Ursula had brought about a rupture between M. Secherin and his mother. I was about to say all this, but I hesitated; I asked myself, if these disclosures would not still further irritate Gontran's passsion? if his vanity would not be more excitd by his vexation at having been less favored than so absurd provincial? And then, if he thought that no one had been more fortunate than himself, he might believe Ursula virtuous, in spite of the bold theories she had uttered and resign himself more easily to her indifference for himself. But still I tried that this belief would but lend new attractions to my cousin.

Agitated by so many perplexing thoughts, I resigned myself to the inspiration of the moment. Gontran had again fallen into a reveire, I took his hand and pressed it tenderly as I said to him:

"Thanks! thanks! my noble Gontran, you have spoken truly. Ursula will at length depart, and we shall be happy and tranquil again."

Gontran smiled bitterly and replied, "You ought to be very happy, to see me treated thus by Ursula; it will quiet you, I hope."

Not wishing to reveal my anxiety to Gontran, I said to him, "Surely, my friend, I am tranquillized. But I do not see in what manner my cousin has treated you badly. She jests, always."

"Jests? And even if she only jested with me, does she not treat me with the utmost contempt? In all my life—no, not in all my life, have I been so insolently played with! I stood there like a fool, without speaking a word! what audacity! what impudence!"

"But, Gontran, it seemed to me that Ursula said nothing more cruel to you than that she would never love you, and that she forbade you to love her."

"Well, is there nothing in that?"

"There is nothing in it if you love me, Gontran. Your tenderness for me prevents your loving her, and it is therefore a matter of indifference to you that she does not love you."

"Doubtless, doubtless you are right. My poor Matilda, I love you. Oh, yes! I love you. You are good, generous, kind! You have heart, elevation, grandeur of soul, while your cousin, I ask of you, what is there, after all, pleasing about her? A laughing face, an elegant shape, I grant you, with the prettiest little foot, and large eyes, sometimes bold and sometimes langnid, an impertinent address, a great fund of impudence, but no heart or soul. Besides, she is extremely false and affected The more I think of it, the less able am I to recover from my surprise. You must have observed this in her, she always appears so melancholy and so gentle. Faith! I have seen some handsome and some dissipated women in my day, but I never saw her like before. I am amazed! How I should love to subdue, to conquer such a character! With what pleasure would I return disdain for disdain, sarcasm for sarcasm!" involuntarily exclaimed my husband.

I hid my face in my hands, and burst into tears, without saying a word. I could no longer doubt it: Ursula was right. Gontran was so absorbed in his own thoughts, that he did not discover my tears

"Oh! I can well understand how pitiless a man would become, after he had mastered one of these haughty and insolent characters. Then, with what delight would he humiliate and even abuse, for they would richly deserve it, creatures, until now so proud." Here he endeavoured to force a laugh. "But these pretensions are enough to make one die with laughter, Madame Secherin! It is she, Madame Secherin, who resolves to be so fashionable! to have the best house in Paris, and to laugh at all the world! Ha! ha! ha! upon my word, it is very diverting. Don't you think so? But what is the matter? You weep, Matilda."

"Ah, Gontran! this interview will be a fatal one."

"What is it you say?"

"There is not a word uttered by Ursula, which has not left some ange some bitterness in your heart."

"Anger! bitterness! What! because Madame Secherin told me I had not the happiness to please her? Ah! my beloved one, what are you thinking about? For what do you take me? I am not very vain, but I cannot think that my merits have undergone any serious depreciation, in consequence of the disdain of Madame Secherin. A capital piece of buffoonery, indeed, are her efforts to make me in love with her, My dear Matilda, I make my confession to you. You see, that what I tell you is true. I found Ursula gentle enough, and I was drawn on by gallantry a little farther than I could have wished. But it was nothing more than a bit of lively caprice on my part. There is nothing in this woman! nothing, absolutely nothing. In love with her! what, I? I truly pity the wretches who are so silly as to wear her chains! In love with her? That would be torture! With such a character? In love with her? I!" Then Gontran, suddenly turning round, said to me, with an expression which seemed constrained and forced, "I in love with her! as if I had not always at my side one who is a thousand times better than she —as if I had not the sweetest, the most devoted of women! an angel of purity and goodness! Poor Matilda! how could you for an instant dread the comparison? you! you!" and he once more fell into a reverie. His last praises caused me much pain. They recalled to my mind those hateful words of Ursula,—"It was requisite that I should manifest my disdain, to make you boast of your wife." My cousin was right; the praises which Gontran had lavished upon me were elicited by his vexation. In placing me above my cousin, he thought more of wounding her than of soothing me.

"It is most important to us," said I to my husband, "that Ursula should depart from Maran in a very few days; she can easily persuade M. Secherin to go."

"Doubtless—she must go, and the sooner the better."

"My dear," said I to Gontran, after a moment's silence, "allow me to speak to you in all frankness,"

"I hear you, my dear."

"Do you not deem it strange, that this conversation, which ought to have entirely satisfied me, since it justifies you in my eyes, should produce upon you and me exactly contrary effects?"

"How is that? I do not understand you."

"Ursula said that she did not love you—that she would never love you: that your gallantries were thrown away, and that she would be gone as soon as possible. Nevertheless, you see, that I weep, while you can scarcely conceal your agitation."

"Ah! good heaven!" said Gontran, "It is plain enough. You weep because you weep for nothing: I am agitated, because there is something in all this which wounds my self love. But what can you infer from that? Will you become Ursula's echo, and, like her, assert that I am, or that I will be in love with her? It is absurd. I was annoyed by her, only because I am not accustomed to such ridicule—that is all. There are a thousand ways of saying the same thing. She should simply have said to me—'I have coquetted with you a little; let us forget it: let us continue good friends: if my presence excites Matilda's jealousy, I will go away. Nothing could have been better. But of what possible use was her profession of principles—and such principles? Of what use was it to tell me, so insolently, that, although she did not love me, she might love others? Why did she express, in so passionate a manner —to say nothing more of it—the intoxication which she would feel on such an occasion? Incomprehensible woman! At that very moment, she manifested real emotion. In truth, I am at a loss what to think. She is an enigma— that creature—an enigma. Some one, besides myself, must amuse himself with finding out the solution. I am not ambitious of that pleasure. To crown all, she has an iron will. She wanted to learn how to ride on horseback, and she rides perfectly well: she has taken it into her head to be a fashionable woman next winter, and she will prove her capacity of becoming so: she will do every thing that she undertakes."

"Just now you thought exactly the contrary, my dear: you said that her pretensions to all this were absurd."

"Ah! my dear, if you will always criticize my slightest expressions, it will become insupportable," said my husband, beating the floor with his foot, "I speak to you in all confidence, in, all sincerity: don't scrutinize my language for more than I say."

I regarded Gontran with sorrowful surprise. "My dear, I will make but one remark. Since your interview with Ursula, you have talked incessantly about her; you have not wasted a thought upon our child."

My husband pressed his hand on his brow, and exclaimed with emotion: "Ah! that is true—that is true—I am much to blame. Pardon me, Matilda; your last words have recalled me to my duty, to my love; they have calmed me, and soothed the foolish and absurd pains of my self-love. Yes, pardon me this last outbreak of pride. In truth, I confess, that I was a little piqued, that I had not made the least possible impression upon Ursula. Do you know why? So that the sacrifice I would have made for you, might have seemed greater. Believe me—nothing will be easier for me, than to forget this devilish woman. You are right, my beloved angel! our child—let us think of our child! With that sweet trust, and my love for you—a love in which you can henceforth implicitly confide—happiness will be for ever restored to us! Pardon me, for having taken to heart Ursula's sarcasms; but it was because she jested with me before you, and I could not hide it from you. Matilda, I am more proud than ever since I have belonged to you. Never mind; after all, you love me as much as of old, do you not? We will no more think of that ridiculous scene, except to make a jest of it. Come, come: let us talk of our child: these sweet cares shall be our refuge from all evil thoughts."

The arrival of one of the tenants, who came to speak to my husband, put an end to this conversation. Gontran went out. My first impulse was to be delighted with the sweet words which he had spoken with all his habitual grace; but it seemed to me that his accents were nervous and constrained, that his looks did not accord with his language. One would have supposed that he either wished to deceive himself, or to quiet me by his expressions of tenderness. At the same time, there was something touching and affecting in his tones. The more I reflected about the impression which Ursula had made upon him, the more imminent did his danger appear. A few days before, I would have wept, and then resorted to timid and useless complaints; but, summoned as I was to new duties, I resolved to change my behaviour completely. I well knew that I had much to apprehend from the violence of my grief; its re-action might be fatal to my offspring. I promised myself to be silent hereafter; not to vex myself with trifles; to fortify myself against my susceptibility;—to harden myself to moral sufferings, and to become, if I may so express myself, extremely frugal of my sorrows. Present circumstances would subject these new determinations to a rude trial. I dried my tears. I coolly contemplated my position.

From that moment, that I might not be crushed under the ruins of my hopes, I looked boldly upon life under its most sombre colors. I did not deceive myself as to the cause of this courageous resolution; I possessed a treasure of happiness and of hope, which nothing in the world could ever take away. Whatever might be the future, my child remained to me; for I had a profound and immovable conviction, that God had sent me this supreme consolation in my woes, as a religious recompense for my devotion to my duty. This blind faith in the divine protection, prevented me from having the least serious apprehension as to the future life of the little being who redoubled my own, and who caused me to forget so many of my woes. I traced for myself a plan of conduct, with the firm resolution never to deviate from it. Eight days would be sufficient for Ursula to persuade her husband to leave Maran; if, at the end of eight days, she was not gone, I should then be convinced that her affected disdain was but a perfidious act of coquetry. I resolved to follow the advice of Madame de Richerville. Once more alone with Gontran, I hoped by my tenderness, by the interest with which the condition I was in ought to inspire him—I hoped, I say, to banish Ursula from his thoughts. However, if his love for her increased, from the very obstacles he encountered; if, after having contended with the influence of that woman with all my love, my devotion, I was forced at last to yield, I would at least succumb with dignity; my child would be left to me, and I should live for it alone. It is impossible to describe the quiet, the confidence, which this resolution imparted. I no longer experienced, as in days past, those vague fears and griefs without aim or end. If, at a former period, I had lost the love of Gontran, nothing would have been left me but overwhelming despair; nothing but a miserable and abjectless life; nothing but pale memories, which would, by their solemn contrast, render the present more miserable. I fell on my knees, and thanked God that he had not suffered me to slumber in so fatal a confidence. Without any thought of condescending to play the part of a spy, I resolved to watch every thing closely and to overlook nothing which would enlighten my understanding.

CHAPTER IV.

MADEMOISELLE DE MARAN.

On the day following this scene, what was my astonishment, to receive a very short note from Mademoiselle de Maran! She announced to me that she should arrive almost at the same time with her letter, and would herself inform me of the cause of her visit. One would really have thought that this woman, warned by some secret instinct of the new vexations which overwhelmed me, was coming for the express purpose of enjoying my torments. Had I known less of Mademoiselle de Maran, I should have been astonished at the audacity of her conduct; particularly after having, the very last time I saw her, so little disguised her feelings of hatred toward me. Her meeting with Ursula also alarmed me. If she had malignantly hoped, foreseen, calculated, that sooner or later, Ursula—being, as I may say, connected with every incident of my early life—should one day prove hostile to me, she would be gratified at what had just occurred, and might become a useful ally to my cousin. It was with bitterness I reflected, that the world is so constituted that we are obliged to receive and welcome to our houses, our most mortal enemies, under the plea of a relationship or connection, which renders their animosity still more odious. I told Gontran of the approaching arrival of my aunt; he received the news almost with indifference. I could not feel so calm about it. Such a journey was so foreign to the habits of Mademoiselle de Maran, who had never quitted Paris during fifteen years, that I suspected it must have been induced by some weighty motive.

At two o'clock my aunt came, accompanied by Servien, one of her maid servants, and a valet, who served her as a courier. She was also attended by a wolf-dog, the successor to Felix. We went out to the front steps of the chateau, to receive Mademoiselle de Maran. She stepped from her carriage with tolerable activity, and did not appear changed in any way. She still wore her red silk gown and bonnet. Notwithstanding my sorrowful forebodings, I could not help smiling with surprise, on seeing my aunt's hood decorated with a tri-colored bow. Servien's hat was also ornamented with an enormous tri-colored cockade. My aunt perceived my astonishment, and, on entering the drawing-room, exclaimed, "I suppose that you are quite dumfounded, that I have not yet pitched the tune of the *Marseilloise, ca ira*, or the *Parisienne;* or some other plaint, patriotical, demagogical, emblematical, or Orleanatical, which are quite as good as the other bucolies of the republic. Tell me then, citizen or citizeness, do I not remind you of one of those *knitteresses* or *conqueresses* of July, with my tri-colored ribbons? Now, do I not? You think perhaps, that I am come to announce to you my marriage with M. de Lafayette, and that it is to take place on the first *sans culottide* of *Frimaire*, before the altar of *our country?* Well, you are perfectly in error. See there, they are beneath my feet—these beautiful tri-colored ribbons; there they are in the fire!" said my aunt, tearing the bow from her head, and throwing it into the fire, after having stamped upon it with most comic rage.

"Bravo! madame," said Gontran, laughing heartily! "bravo!" I thought you had ratted from our party."

"How! ratted? do you pretend to make game of me, M. de Lancry? Be persuaded, if I have consented to prank myself out in these execrable colors—which stink of the mob, the empire, and the guillotine—it was that I might travel quietly."

"And did not your royalty revolt at this concession, madame?" said Gontran.

"What has my royalism to do with such a case? Is it necessary to look so narrowly into our means of safety, when they serve us well? Would I, in the times of citizen Cartouche, and citizen Maudrin, have missed taking *a safe conduct* from those gentlemen in order to pass through their gangs in safety? Well! this abominable cockade and this passport, stamped with a foolish gallic cock, which looks to me like a very fat citizen of Maine, are merely safe conducts. I use them, but I despise them; do you comprehend me?

"Perfectly, madam; but to what good chance do we owe your welcome visit?"

"Imagine to yourself, my poor boy, that they are about to try—that is to say, condemn, these unfortunate ministers. There are commotions every day in Paris; they are talking of Pillaging the hotels of the nobility, going to perform a second '93. I have stowed my plate in a hiding-place, which Belzebub himself could not find out: I have brought my diamonds and five thousand louis in the false bottom of the carriage, and I came here to wait the issue of events. If things should become quiet, I shall return to Paris; If not, I shall again emigrate to England; but, at the present moment, there is no staying there. All the friends who visited me are frightened, and have flown; and really it was time. Some of them have followed that good old king and Madame la Dauphine: the others are in Vendee, waiting for Madame and, Heaven be thanked! they will, for a long time to come, cut out work enough for these new blues: others, in fine, have made a regular run, either to Italy or Germany, as in the time of our first revolution. I 'faith! I was moping myself to death in Paris, when, by way of change, a horrible fright came over me; this it is which has procured me the happiness of coming to embrace you, my dear children. I like so much to contemplate a happy couple—it makes my heart joyous. I say to myself on seeing you, 'It is owing to me, that these two hearts, made only for each other, are united in such rosy charms- Ha! ha! ha! but only see the effect of the country air, I already talk in eulogies. Where are your oaten pipes, handsome Sylvander? I should like to sing your happiness to the mellifluous tones to the double flute of the Shepherd of Arcadia,"

Mademoiselle de Maran's gaiety alarmed me; her shrill and mocking laugh always foroboded some new malignity.

On entering the room, my aunt had, according to her usual habit, put on her spectacles although she was not going either to read or work; but they served, as it were, to conceal her looks, under the shelter of their glasses. She could make her observations upon every one, without being remarked.

I perceived, while she was chatting with us, that she was attentively scanning both Gontran's countenance and my own-

"And Ursula," asked Mademoiselle de Maran, "have you any news from her?"

"She has been here, madam, for several days, with her husband." replied I.

"Can it be possible! why, then we are quite a family party—only think, how opportunely I have arrived! But where is she, the dear girl?"

"She is taking a walk with Monsieur de Secherin, and will, I trust, soon return," said Gontran.

"Taking a walk with her husband!" exclaimed Mademoiselle de Maran, "and I find you here, with your wife, Gontran? Surely, this is the promised land for married couples; this is perfectly extravagant, and not to be believed: it really is a patriarchal mode of life, and prodigiously affecting! She is taking a walk alone, with her husband! How very good of her! for he is as stupid as a goose, and has as much conversation as an ostrich. But, tell me, my children, do they continue mutually to bestow upon each other the delicate and tendera ppelations of *pretty dear*, and *dear wolf*?"

"You will find Ursula much changed, madame," said I to Mademoiselle de Maran with a bitter smile.

"Changed! is she not pretty, as she used to be?"

"Yes, madame, she is as lovely as ever; but her character is more developed, she is much less melancholy than formerly."

"Ha, ha, ha! I laugh in spite of myself," said Mademoiselle de Maran. and when I think how much my partiality for you, Matilda, used to blind me, Do you recollect how I used, on all occasions, to scold Ursula? how ugly I thought her? I may tell you this now, my children Well, it was a horrible injustice, for, on the contrary, I all the time thought her very clever and pretty; and I even—for one may say so much before a husband, because husbands say even worse things, when their wives are not present—I really thought that Ursula had more expressive features, more grace, than you, Matilda: and notwithstanding, it was from love to you, and to praise you at the expense of your cousin, that I told these horrid lies. Was I deceitful, eh? or rather, was is not too good? For when affection carries me away, I am capable of doing anything. But now, do not, my dear girl, imagine from all this that you are not, at least, as handsome as Ursula. You are, without doubt, a thousand times more so. She cannot vie with you as to regularity of features but she has that indescribable something, that piquancy, that engaging manner, which turns the heads of those wicked, good-for-nothing fellows." And laughing violently, she pointed to Gontran; then bent down close to my ear, and laughingly whispered; "Tell me, are you not jealous of that *little* devil Ursula? Do not trust those prim and innocent creatures, who smile like a repentant Magdalen with the glancing eye of a Venus Aphroditus."

Had my aunt calculated every word she uttered, with the most meditated malignity, she could not have wounded me more cruelly.

This circumstance induced me to believe, that chance sometimes favour evil-disposed persons, as well as those of generous character. Both the one and the other are sometimes favoured by a strange fatality.

Gontran was almost as much confounded as myself, by the ill-timed pleasantries of Mademoiselle de Maran. He could only manage to stammer out, with a forced smile, "Do you think it possible that I could be unfaithful to my dear Matilda? Are we not, as you have said, a very model for happy couples?"

"Don't you perceive that I'm only joking, you naughty libertine? I should be glad to learn, that you could be unfaithful to her! In the country, it would be inexcusable. In Paris, it is quite another affair. The excitement of society, opportunity, and what not, as, for example, the beautiful Princess de Ksernika; but here, oh, fie! fie! poor, dear little girl! you who have always been so good toward Gontran, and more especially with regard to that abominable Lugarto."

The colour left my cheeks; Gontran drew himself up, as if he had been bitten by a serpent: "Pray, madame, do not let us say a word more about that; do not bring to my recollection so painful a scene."

"How! ought I not to speak about it, you ungrateful fellow! I tell you I will speak of it; I will repeat it again and again! Where will you find, I should like to know, another woman, who, to get into the graces of her husband's creditor, would risk the loss of her own reputation? I call it absolutely sublime, whatever you think of it, my dear friend!"

"Madame!" said Gontran, "it is an infamous calumny; and I proclaimed it loudly in the presence of that wretch!"

"Good Heaven! I know full well it is a calumny, my poor children! I know that Matilda is as innocent and pure, as the young swan just issuing from its white egg-shell; but——"

I saw what Mademoiselle de Maran was aiming at, and I interrupted her; and said to her, with a firmness which astonished her as much as it did Gontran, "You have done us, madam, the honor of coming to see us. We could not have ex pected to have been favoured with this visit. We shall always be most happy to receive you. We shall never forget that this house once belonged to your brother; we will do all in our power to welcome you; but we may be permitted to hope, madam, that you will not make it your business while you remain here, to call up recollections, which are painful, both to my husband and myself!"

"But, my dear——"

"But, madam," replied I in a louder tone, once more interrupting Mademoiselle de Maran. "Since you appear to have forgotten the reason which ought to have prevented any further intimacy between yourself and me, we certainly have a right to expect that not a word more will be said regarding those odious calumnies, of which you make yourself the echo. I think this is not asking too great a sacrifice on your part. If you will do us this favor, madam, we shall feel very grateful; and you will perhaps experience some pleasure, in seeing those united and happy, whom you—doubtless involuntarily—would have rendered discontented and unhappy."

My calmness and self-possession had a singular and almost unlooked-for effect, on both Mademoiselle and Gontran.

After remaining silent for some moments, my aunt, looking at Gontran ironically, rejoined, "How is this, my poor viscount? it is now Matilda who says *we*. Has the lance yielded its authority to the distaff?"

"Matilda speaks a little on my account, and much more on her own. I unite with her, in begging that you will be kind enough to forget occurrences which give us pain; but I cannot permit myself to impose conditions as to your residence with us," added Gontran, looking at me severely.

Although I did not expect to hear my husband almost take the part of Mademoiselle de Maran against me, I did not allow myself to be abashed; but felt satisfied at the firmness of the language I had used, and which almost surprised myself.

"I only place conditions upon my own presence here, madam. I have had the honor to tell you that I shall always remember you are my father's sister, and that you are here in M. de Lancry's house. If I felt it, unfortunately, impossible to submit quietly to those pleasantries of yours, I should beg of you to excuse my leaving you: Monsieur de Lancry would take upon himself to do the honors of Maran, and I should instantly set out for Paris."

I had expressed myself with so much resolution, that Mademoiselle de Maran exclaimed, "Really, she would be capable of doing as she says; but I no longer understand your wife, Gontran, she is so changed. What can the matter be."

"The matter is, that I have suffered quite enough, madam, and I am resolved hereafter to avoid every vexation that I can escape."

"Bless me! and no bad taste either. You wish to coddle yourself up comfortably, and take care of yourself, my dear: so it appears to me."

"Yes, madam; it is necessary that I be careful of myself as you say."

Notwithstanding the vexations he had endured, Gontran gave me a tender look, which told me that he understood me. Mademoiselle de Maran ironically replied; "Well, my dear girl, we will draw up a programme of subjects which I am interdicted from approaching. First, Lugarto, and the calumnies relating to the aforesaid. Second, Your husband's infidelity to you with the beautiful Princess de Ksernika. Third, All comparisons which might induce the belief that I find Ursula more lively and engaging than yourself. And lastly, all allusions to any marked attention, which, in the common order of things, that wicked wretch, Gontran, might be tempted to pay Ursula, to the detriment of that simple fool, Secherin, who—but this between ourselves—will lose nothing by waiting. But see: here they come, and in the nick of time."

M. Secherin at this moment entered the room with his wife. "See, see," said he; "here is that good Mademoiselle de Maran."

"Myself, in flesh and blood, my good Monsieur Secherin; and I was just this moment talking of you. Good morning, Ursula—good morning, my dear girl," said Mademoiselle de Maran, rising and kissing Ursula's forehead. "I am so happy to see you all together. This is as I anticipated—to see you living as two sisters, and leaving one another as seldom as possible."

"And even not parted at all if that might be," said M. Secherin. "There is nothing like living in one family. Isn't that true, Mademoiselle de Maran? you can understand that—you who are the cream of good women."

"Ah! Monsieur Secherin, let me warn you that I shall take to scolding you again, if you continue to call me *cream*, First of all, it offends my modesty, and it will compromise me as one of the aristocracy. You are mighty good with your cream, Monsieur Secherin. After the glorious days of July, which established equality, fraternity, and liberty, do you think that such distinctions still exist? Call me simply good woman, but not cream, or I shall rebel."

"Well, good woman be it then: but you are a famously good woman—so good," added M. Secherin, becoming serious all at once—"so good, that you remind me of my poor mother, as my poor mother reminded me of you."

"This comparison is a eulogium upon me, your mother, and, above all, on your own judicious penetration, my good Monsieur Secherin. But, have you had the misfortune to lose your mother?"

"No, no, thank God! but strange things have happened since I saw you."

"Really; well, now, tell me about it. You know what interest I feel in everything that concerns you. What has happened, then, my poor dear Monsieur Secherin?"

It was in vain that Ursula, fearing the indiscretion of her husband, made sign on sign to him: he did not perceive them, and continued: "Oh dear! yes! mamma and we are separated."

"Impossible! my poor, dear child! you have separated from your mamma—and for what? Good Heaven!"

"Because mamma had taken a dislike to Ursula, and chose to think that darling dear permitted Chopinelle, our sub-prefect—who, by the way, was turned out by the revolution of July—to make love to her."

The countenance of Mademoiselle de Maran—which, until then, had worn a comic and ironical expression—became, all at once, dignified and severe. She said to M. Secherin, "To doubt the virtue of Ursula, would be to doubt the morality of the education and the solidity of the principles which I gave her. Your mother, Monsieur Secherin, must have been cruelly prejudiced againts Ursula, to have believed such an enormity. You know that my attachment does not mislead me. Well, then I will be your guaranty for Ursula's good conduct. Whatever the appearances against her may be, never believe in these appearances; for the dear child loves you much more than she allows you to believe."

"Ah! madam! as I always said, you pour balm into my heart!" exclaimed M. Secherin; "never in my life did I doubt Ursula. I give you my word of honour, I did not; but if I had doubted her, what you say would have removed all my doubts, as deep-rooted as they might be."

"Madam," said Ursula, "you are too good, too indulgent."

"Not at all; I am just. I only render homage to true merit. It makes me so happy to see you thus united. You can have no idea how it delights me to see two such charming couples agreeing so well together. What pleases me the most in this re-union, is to think that all this is nothing to what it will be. The future will bind you more closely together; that is to say, you will end by forming a family so united and confounded, that no one will be able to tell which is which! it will become a species of commonality, a confraternity in the taste of *Melimelo*, of Otaheite, or the golden age, where no one possesses anything but which belongs to another! do you not think so, my good M. Secherin?"

"It is quite true, madam," said he laughing; "only I fear my wife and I will be the greatest gainers by that bargain."

"Don't talk to me with your mock modesty, about being greater gainers. Between friends, such trifles ought not to be considered; besides which, will not both parties bring in something? are you not like brother and sister with Matilda? If Gontran considers your wife as his, does not your wife like Gontran as much as you? What are you prating, then, about being gainers."

"You are right, perfectly right, madam," cried M. Secherin, gaily; "to put one's heart and one's affection *en commandite*, in such a partnership, as we say in business, is to put all that one can put into it; and that gives one an equal share in the division of happiness."

"Do you hear him?" said Mademoiselle de Maran to us, clapping her hands, "do you hear him? How delightful is his comparison, his partnership and *commandite*? It must be Ursula who inspires you to say such clever things! It is surprising what influence a good young woman exercises! how it polishes a man, how it gives him manner! Doubtless, my good M. Secherin, you already possessed good qualities when you were married, but still you were wanting in that—what shall I say—delicacy, that refinement, that dignity of expression which you now possess to a marvellous degree. You are really not the same man: your roughness, your primitive frankness, are now tempered by an urbanity, replete with gracefulness and ease. But mind; dont become vain about it, for you have nothing to do with it."

"How! madam?"

"Certainly not; if you are so it is no fault of the eglantine when it becomes a rose-bush. You are neither more nor less than the work of this charming little gardener who stands here. She has grafted you, my good M Secherin; she has grafted you."

"Faith! the comparison is a very just one," exclaimed M. Secherin; "she has grafted me—I am grafted."

"To be sure! and moreover, with a double shot, my dear sir," said Mademoiselle de Maran, looking at Ursula with so expressive a smile, that I conceived there must be some double meaning in Mademoiselle de Maran's joke.

"After all," said M. Secherin, very innocently, "perhaps you are only laughing at me? but do you think that I am really altered for the better?"

"My good M. Secherin," said my aunt, seriously, "I have, perhaps, but one good quality in the world, and that is veracity. I may almost say brutal veracity. Why should I say this to you, if I did not think so? Did I mince the matter with you, when I had occasion to find fault with your manner of speaking."

"No, no! that's very true. Well, then, in fact, I do believe you—and I will believe you—because, if I am altered for the better, it is owing to Ursula, as you said; but really I had never, myself, perceived any change at all."

"This charming and retiring modesty, only proves more strongly the truth of what I have advanced, my good M. Secherin; but I must say no more, or I shall make Ursula vain, both of herself and you. And now, I leave you; I must ask Matilda to show me to my room, for I am rather fatigued with my journey, without taking into account the horrid nausea which these abominable tricoloured ribbons gave me. Fortunately, this rural calmness—the sight of those I have made happy, must restore me. Well; I leave you, one and all, to the enjoyment of your loves, for I am jabbering like a magpie that has lost its nest."

CHAPTER V.

REMEMBRANCE OF CHILDHOOD.

The real motive for Mademoiselle de Maran's visit, I in vain endeavoured to divine. I tried to persuade myself, that it had no other cause than the one she had stated; and, as a proof of it, the newspapers we received from Paris mentioned that rather serious disturbances had taken place in that city. Nevertheless, the terror of my aunt appeared to me exaggerated. If I admitted for a moment that other reasons might have brought her to Maran, I was, in spite of myself alarmed. Her presence then appeared to threaten me with some new misfortune.

I attentively observed my husband. He appeared absent, pensive, and preoccupied. Ursula had several times carefully avoided remaining alone with me. I felt great anxiety for her departure.

I did not know whether she had prepared the way, or had induced her husband to think of leaving Maran. I spoke to Gontran respecting it several times. He told me, that my cousin had assured him she was compelled to act with much discretion: that the sudden breaking up of an arrangement, so long agreed upon, must have an awkward appearance; but that she hoped to manage it in a few days.

I had not wished to acquaint either Ursula or my aunt with the delicate position in which I found myself. This was a happiness I wished to keep entirely to myself, and that it should remain a secret as long as possible.

My aunt continued to make game of M. Secherin, but appeared attentively to watch Ursula and my husband. She faithfully kept her promise, and spoke no more of the past, or of anything that could recall painful recollections to my mind. She doubtless knew I had sufficient firmness to act as I said I would, and leave Maran, rather than be subject to her perfidious mockery.

She had too much sagacity—too much penetration, not to perceive a remarkable change in the manner of Gontran. He, formerly so lively, so brilliant, so animated; had become pensive, absent; sometimes harsh and impatient, and then sullen and oppressed. My uneasiness augmented daily. I feared that what I had foreseen was fast approaching: that his inclination for my cousin being thwarted, and irritated by her affected indifference, it would assume the character of a passion.

I again observed, that his features had assumed that sorrowful nervous smile, which had not clouded them since he had escaped the influence of M. Lugarto. I several times surprised him walking in the park with hurried steps, and once I observed he had been weeping. He rarely spoke harshly to me; on the contary he frequently treated me with more than usual tenderness. Alas! by these shows of kindness, I felt convinced that he was suffering.

Whenever Ursula remained alone with Gontran and myself, she affected an extragavant gaiety, which increased the depression of my husband. She exhibited the same mocking depravity which she had shown in her interview with Gontran; but when M. de Secherin was present, instead of adopting these sentiments as her own she attributed them to some imaginary being, some unknown heroine of romance, some demoniacal character, of whose existence she seemed to delight to dream.

I cannot deny that in these conversations, Ursula continned to display an infinity of wit, and to how herself really superior to Gontran. What I felt with regard to her, was strange. inexplicable. I hated her, at the same time, for having secured the affections of my husband, and for wickedly laughing at the torments he endured.

Had she appeared to participate the affection of Gontran, I should have been wretchedly unhappy, doubtless more unhappy than in seeing her disdain him; but I should perhaps, have been much less alarmed. Ursula's perpetual irony proved that she herself felt nothing—that she had complete dominion over M. de Lancry; and it was this influence which, above all, I dreaded.

Some time after the arrival of Mademoiselle de Maran, I was awakened one morning very early, by the sound of carriage wheels. After listening for some time and hearing nothing farther, I thought I had been mistaken, and went to sleep again.

When Blondeau came into my room, I asked her if she had heard anything? she told me, she also heard the noise of a carriage but there was nothing strange in that, for M. Secherin had quitted the chateau at four o'clock.

"With Ursula?" exclaimed I.

"No, madam," replied Blondeau; "M. Secherin's servant told me that his master was going away very early, that he might arrive in the course of to-night, at Saint Chamant, where he is going upon business."

This made me very uneasy; and I sent to Ursula, to request her to come to me. In a few minutes she entered my room.

"Your husband has left Maran without you," I exclaimed.

"Dear me! with what an angry air you speak to me, my dear Matilda; what is there so astonishing in this departure?"

"What is there astonishing?" cried I, surprised at her great audacity.

"Certainly—nothing can be more simple. Last night, after retiring to our room, my husband was talking to me as usual of his business; all at once he remembered, while looking through his pocket-book, that a sale of land was about to take place at Saint Chamant, some of which lies contiguous to ours, and for that reason he desires to purchase it. He would not disturb any one last night, but this morning, by daybreak, he sent for post horses, and desired me to make his apologies to you. He will be absent only a short time, and he will take advantage of this opportunity to visit his property in the neighborhood of Saint Chamant."

I felt indignant at this conduct: Ursula had, doubtless, purposely permitted so natural an opportunity for leaving us to escape; she must, then, have some design on Gontran: my suspicions became more and more confirmed. I had so long constrained my feelings, that I could not dissemble any farther; did not think myself bound to hide from her that I was present in the room during her conversation with Gontran. I said to her: "What interest can you now have in remaining here? it must be very powerful, since you have not taken advantage of your husband's journey, to leave Maran."

Ursula, faithful to her system of falsehood, did not yet lift her mask; but replied to me, with an expression of sorrowful astonishment: "Tell me, I once more beg, Matilda, what is the matter with you? I really know not what to think of it. You speak coldly to me, and of my leaving Maran, as if my presence here annoyed you: what does all this mean?"

"It means that, eight days ago, I heard your conversation with my husband; yes, I was in one of the closets of the alcove; I had told Gontran how much his attention to you grieved me, and he at once proposed to me that he should request you to leave Maran." I could not prevent myself from pronouncing these last words with triumphant pride.

Ursula knitted her brows slightly, and smiled bitterly. "Your husband knew, then, you were there, during our interview?"

"He did not know it—can you now understand? Do you understand why I should be astonished, that, after having promised my husband you should leave Maran, you still continue to remain here, notwithstanding M. Secherin's departure."

"Well, then! since you were there, I am, between ourselves, delighted at it, my dear Matilda! you are satisfied, I hope?"

"Satisfied?"

"Yes, certainly. You perceived how harshly I treated your wicked, faithless husband! he will, I think, no longer desire to be so. Did I not show myself an excellent friend? Did I not even go so far as to depict myself in the most odious light, that I might change to coldness, to hate, perhaps, the love he pretended to have for me?"

"And you think to impose upon me by that falsehood?"

"Falsehood! Were you not there? do you not recollect with what disdain I treated him? You were there! Who would have thought that the recompence of my virtuous conduct was so near at hand! Indeed, Matilda, I cannot believe in so fortunate a chance, so providental—as my mother-in-law would say;" and Ursula burst into a loud laugh. This time, at all events my cousin was spiteful as well as ironical.

"Hear me, Ursula," said I, "this is no time for raillery; the conversation I am about to have with you, will be a very serious one; it will, without doubt, be the last which we shall have together:"

"I doubt it much," cried Ursula, imperiously; "for it is I who have to complain of the disloyal conduct of yourself and of your husband."

"What do you mean to say?"

"In hiding yourself, and playing the spy upon an interview, which I thought a secret one, you committed an abuse of confidence; you made me then your sport. Do you know I might wish to revenge myself.

"These proud words, Ursula, please me much more than the soft melancholy, of which I have been too long the dupe: I know, at least that I have an enemy. Well—so be it.

"I have no wish to be your enemy. You have been guilty of an unworthy action toward me, and I have told you that I may wish to revenge myself; that is all."

"But have you not, since first you came into this house, made it your task to sow disunion in it?"

"With what can you reproach me? Can I prevent your husband's inclination for me? Can I do better than to rally him, than to deprive him of all hope: than to promise him to leave the house, because both you and he desire it?"

"Why did you not go this morning, then; was it not an excellent opportunity? I tell you, that you had wished to deprive him of all hope, instead of making a display of—I know not what, metaphysical and immodest sentiments—instead of saying to him, "I will never love you, but I could love others passionately," had you said simply, 'I will not transgress my duty, your wife is my friend, my sister—I will not wrong her, nor will I wrong my husband;' such language would have been noble and worthy of you, instead of being a perfidious calculation."

"You will, I trust, permit me to be the judge, as to the propriety or meaning of my own words; jealousy is a bad counsellor, and I think that it misleads you."

"It makes me see more clearly."

"You are too much interested in the question, Matilda, to judge rationally; by speaking to your husband as I have spoken, I deprived him of all hope: men believe not in our principles, they do in our indifference."

"I doubt not your experience on this subject, Ursula; but there is an infallable means of breaking off a liking, and that is, absence"

"Where it does not augment it!"

"Then it is from indifference to my husband, that you remain here?"

"Absolutely! I have declared to him, that I felt almost a dislike to him. You heard it, yourself. What do you require more?"

"Well, then, admitting that my suspicions, my fears have been exaggerated was it not your bounden duty to have put an end to them, by not prolonging your residence here?"

"It is impossible to turn people out of doors with more urbanity; yet, I shall take upon myself to make you a few observations: you must feel, after the promise I had given to your husband, that if I this morning allowed M. Secherin to depart without accompanying him---it was because serious considerations obliged me to act thus."

"And was my happiness, my tranquillity of life, which you come so wickedly to trouble---was that not a consideration?"

"I am delighted to find, Matilda, that you think so much of your own comfort; you will not, therefore, consider it particularly strange that I should think a little of mine. I have twice indirectly spoken of our departure to my husband; but his surprise was so great, that I felt he would not be able to account to himself for this abrupt change in my determinations, without some suspicson arising in his mind; either, he would believe that I was flying from your husband because I feared I might perticipate his love, or he would think that your jealousy had urged forward my departure. Either way, you see, his doubts would be awakened, his confidence would be shaken, and I acknowledge to you, I desire, as much as you can do, to live tranquilly."

"Ursula---Ursula---take care! it is only mocking me to give me such reasons as these."

"They are excellent ones for me, I promise you. It required all the authority of the language of truth to prevent my husband from giving credit to the visions of his mother, with regard to M. Chopinelle; I have no desire to see a renewal of such scenes.

"Notwithstanding all I feel against you," exclaimed I, "I would not have dared to make any allusion to your conduct in that circumstance; but as you yourself speak of it without shame, I will tell you, that it is precisely because I know that you were guilty of a fault, which nothing could excuse, that I have a right to suspect and fear you, where such a man as M. de Lancry is concerned."

"Matilda!"

"It is because I was a witness to all that passed at Rouvrai, that I have the presentiment, the certainty, that your apparent indifference for my husband hides some artful scheme."

Ursula indignantly shrugged her shoulders. "Good heavens! I know full well that you believed the absurd calumnies of my mother-in-law, but it is now too late to renew them. You had an admirable opportunity of accusing me, when, before my husband, and before his mother, I invoked your testimony in support of my innocence."

"Dare you speak thus, Ursula? was it not pity, was it not a generous recollection of our former friendship which kept me silent? Ah! how truly did she say, 'May you never repent the support you are affording to that guilty woman!' But do not let us recur to the past. For the last time I ask you and if necessary, I beseech you, not to prolong your stay here. After what has passed beween us, our intercourse must be painful. Pray, rejoin your husband. You are, you say, indifferent for Gontran! Who can retain you? Your disposition is such, that you can be happy anywhere; I have never done you an injury; do not obstinately prolong my torments."

"It would grieve me much to torment you; but I again tell you that I cannot, for a vain fancy, for a caprice on your part, adventure upon a foolish step, which might compromise my future prospects," replied Ursula, with the most imperturbable coolness.

"I think, that in all this you calculate erroneously," said I to my cousin, surmounting my emotion. "You wish to await the return of your husband?"

"I desire to do so."

"Well, as you please! but whether right or wrong, I am jealous of you.'

"You are wrong, very wrong."

"It may be so, but I am jealous; your refusal to remove from Maran increase that jealousy still more: the return of M. Secherin will not quiet my uneasiness. I may hide the cause of it from him, but he will at last guess at it. Reflect well upon this. The day of the hunting-party, it required all the self-possession I could muster; and your husband's attention was diverted from me, or he would have discovered my secret. You, therefore, must perceive, that by remaining here, you incur a danger greater than the one you fear."

"How can I help it? If I am lost by any act of yours, I shall resign myself to my fate; but I shall never be mad or stupid enough to ruin myself by my own deed."

"Perhaps, Ursula, perhaps. Take good care——"

"Do you threaten me? And with what do you threaten me?"

"I do not threaten you—but I warn you, that on this question hang my happiness, my fate, my life! I shall exert every energy; I will leave nothing undone to preserve that which you wish, perhaps, to wrest from me."

"You—capable of a cowardly accusation? I do not believe it; I defy you to it."

"You are right in defying me, Ursula; you know that I am incapable of such an action; but, without any cowardly accusation, I may address myself to your husband's goodness of heart. I may avow my fears to him, admitting that I know they are senseless and unfounded, but that they wound me grievously; that they cannot compromise you; it may, perhaps, awaken your husband's suspicions; but then it is you who have willed it to be so."

"In that case, I should know how to defend, or revenge myself."

"Listen attentively to me, Ursula! I swear to you by the memory of my mother, that if you persist in remaining here, in spite of me, I will not hesitate to go to any extremity, however disastrous it may be. A secret presentiment tells me, that one of the most fatal questions of my life is being agitated at this moment: I warn you that a great change has taken place in my character. It has become as firm and resolute, as it was weak and timid. Do not push me to extremities. I do not ask anything that is not possible, that is not feasible."

"It appears to me, that I am the best judge of that. I know my husband better than you can do."

"You purposely exaggerate his susceptibility: I have seen the influence you have over him. You will not make me believe, that the man whose confidence in you was so blind as to believe your fable regarding the letter from M. Chopinelle—that the man who was not shaken in his faith by the awful oath pronounced by his mother—you will not, I repeat, make me believe that this man, who lives only for you, and by you, will have the slightest suspicion when he sees you coming to rejoin him, and when you tell him that you would feel too unhappy when absent from him."

"He would consider that a ridiculous exaggeration."

"It is one of those exaggerations which devoted and generous hearts like his admit more willingly, being themselves capable of experiencing them. Your faintest wishes are absolute orders to him. Were you to tell him, we will suppose, that you wish to take a journey into Italy: he will believe it, and hasten to gratify your wish."

"A thousand thanks, for the good opinion you have of my ability," said

Ursula, with a sardonic smile; "unfortunately, I believe you exaggerate my talents. Be pacified, however. When my husband returns, I will remain here only long enough to bring about our departure in a natural and proper manner. Till then, in my turn, let me beg of you to insist on nothing farther and to accord me your hospitality for that time."

"This is really infamous!" cried I, with indignation. "My life is to be rendered wretched, then, because your will must have scope?"

"Let reason resume its power, forget these senseless suspicions; and then these phantoms will disappear, and your mind will once more enjoy tranquillity."

"That is to say, forget you are in pain, and then you will no longer suffer!"

"Believe me, Matilda, nothing can be more painful to me than this discussion, and that——"

"Well!" cried I, interrupting my cousin; "since there must be a trial of strength between us, I accept the combat. You make use of every means in your power to attack me in that which is dearest to me: I shall employ every means in mine to defend myself. Your pretended indifference to my husband, is a mere trick of skillful coquettishness, which cannot deceive me. You wish to please him. Up to the present time, I have never mentioned your shameful adventure at Rouvrai: I shall no longer remain silent. If he were tempted to forget me, for a moment, for you; me, who have always given him proofs of my affection and my devotion—he would then compare us, and see to what description of woman he has sacrificed me."

"Matilda! Matilda! in your turn, take care!" cried Ursula; and her eyes seemed to sparkle with anger. "Take care what you say to him? Never in my life, would I forgive such a calumny! Do you understand me? Do not exasperate me!"

"I was not mistaken!" exclaimed I: "My husband is not indifferent to you, then, since you fear his being informed of that adventure!"

"I value the esteem of your husband, as I do that of all persons of respectability; and it is abominable in you to wish to deprive me of it!" rejoined Ursula, in a tone of outraged dignity.

"You value his esteem? and you have not hesitated, barefacedly, to avow the most corrupt principles! You have not hesitated to rail at all that is holy and sacred in the world! No! No! I am more and more convinced, that your cunningness of instinct has whispered to you, that, being incapable of pleasing by generous and noble qualities, you could only astound his imagination by some extraordinary and singular affectation; but, as soon as he shall be informed that all this frame-work of meretricious pretension is set up merely to offer him a heart, which M. Chopinelle has hitherto fully occupied—"

"Matilda! again I say, take care! Do not provoke me too far!"

"Oh! now that I know you, I can no longer fear you! The delusion that I laboured under with regard to you, might have rendered you dangerous—but that is happily dispelled!"

"Well, then," exclaimed my cousin, no longer endeavouring to conceal the bad feelings which agitated her, "since your delusion is dispelled—since you know me—since you mistrust me, I have no longer any motives for conciliation. It has cost me dearly to dissemble with you, for a long—long time. You have unmasked me, say you; look at me, then steadfastly in the face!"

I was terrified at the fearful expression of audacity and wickedness, which were all at once exhibited in the features of Ursula.

"For many years this mask has incommoded me," rejoined Ursula.

"For many years? What do you mean, Ursula?"

"Ah! that surprises you You believed me a devoted friend—a sister, did you? most ingenuous and candid woman!" and she contemptuously shrugged her shoulders.

"Can it be possible!"

"You forget, then, all you have made me suffer—you, I say! even from my childhood?"

"I! I!"

"You, Matilda! You must consider me as very insensible, very docile, or very stupid, to believe I had forgotten our younger days. You know not, then, how much hate and envy my ulcerated heart has stored up, since the fatal chance which brought me near you!"

"And I. I blessed that day, because I thought it gave a sister to me."

"You ought to have cursed it, rather—for it then gave you a victim, and subsequently an enemy."

"A victim! an enemy! Gracious Heaven! what have I done to you?"

"Was it not in your name—was it not to your pride, that I was daily sacrificed? You do not remember, then, how severely and on every occasion, I was humiliated, wounded, despised on your account. No! there is no torture, to which self love could be subjected, which has not been inflicted upon me—and always by comparing me with you! When a child, my education was a bounty, which I owed to your charity! If any article of dress was given to me, it was an alms thrown to me at your expense! This was not all—praise, flatteries and rewards were always and everywhere showered upon you; while reproaches, punishments, harsh treatment where my portion! And you believe that I can have forgotten all this? and that there are not wounds which leave indelible scars? And you believe that you have now the right to reproach me with a fault, and to threaten me?"

"Oh! my God! my God!" exclaimed I, hiding my face in my hands; "the diabolical foresight of Mademoiselle de Maran has not deceived her; she knew in what a soul she sowed the seeds of envy!"

"What does it signify to me!" rejoined Ursula, with renewed violence; "what does it signify to me by whose hand I am stricken! I think only of the blow I have received. Have I not always suffered, and more keenly too, because I was abased that you might be exalted? Punished, while a child; contemned when a young girl; such was my lot, while I remained with you. When they talked of our being married, you could pretend—you! to wed a man of exalted rank and fortune. I, on the coutrary, must consider myself but too happy to take some poor and vulgar individual. You were so rich! you were so beautiful! you possessed so many adorable qualities! while I, on the contrary, was poor, foolish, and bereft of every grace which made you so beloved! And, moreover, what they predicted, actually happened; you married a young nobleman, a man of talent and charming manners—I, a ridiculous and vulgar man of business. Oh! never, never shall I forget that moment, when before you, then beaming with pride and happiness, looking at your noble bridegroom, they insulted and jeered the man whose name I blushed to bear! Oh! that comparison was a terrible and final blow to me! Thus, once more was I sacrificed—immolated to you and your insolent happiness, which, for so long a time, had crushed me."

"This is too horrible!" I exclaimed; "but you know full well that I was not to blame for the perfidious conduct of my aunt. You know full well, that even during my childhood, I exposed myself to punishment that I might share the hardships you endured. You know full well, that in after years, it was not my fault that you did not marry a man of your own choice."

"You offered me one-half your fortune, you would say—did I accept it? Who, then, tells me that I have not my pride, as you have yours? Who tells you that I have not been still more soured by your eternal affectation of generosity and of pity?"

"Why, then, you must have always hated me! and these assurances of friendship which you have lavished, until now, have been merely falsehoods—I may say blasphemies! What! from our very childhood, has this odious hate been fermenting in your bosom? and you have been able to dissemble until now. Could nothing soften you? neither my sisterly affection, nor the hatred which Mademoiselle de Maran bore toward me? How is it possible that, with your understanding, you did not see that it was her fixed purpose to humiliate you by praising me, in order to excite your jealousy, your envy, that she might render you one day my enemy? Ah! Ursula, Ursula! could she but hear you, how happy would she be to find that you are thus serving her, as the blind instrument of her hatred!"

"You need not blame Mademoiselle de Maran so much," cried Ursula, impatiently; "all she has done has been to develop the feeling of envy which existed in me: I was born jealous and envious, as you were born faithful and generous; had we changed places, in spite of all the wicked combinations of Mademoiselle de Maran, she could never have awakened in your breast an ardent jealousy against me."

"But, since you acknowledge that I am faithful and generous, why do you hate me? What have I done to you?"

"It is precisely because you are faithful and generous that I hate you. I hate you still, because I have always been humiliated on your account; I hate you because you enjoy all the happiness I envy. I hate you, because I have been compelled to blush before you. We are alone—I may therefore say all I wish with impunity. Well, then, that which has filled my cup of rage against you to overflowing, was that you should be acquainted with that ridiculous intrigue; and that you should have seen me treated with such sovereign contempt by my husband's mother."

"But, that intrigue did exist—you merited that contempt.

"And it is precisely that which exasperates me—were you to tell me that I am as ugly and as hump-backed as Mademoiselle de Maran, it would not in any way offend me."

"But——"

"But—I do not wish to make myself appear better than I am. I do not wish to discuss the point. I do not say that I am right in feeling thus—I say that I feel thus. Chance has willed that either by you, or on your account, I have been wounded where I was most sensitive—you were the cause of it, and I hate you. This is, perhaps, not logical, but it is real. This language seems to astonish you You know not, Matilda, how singularly sorrow and isolation develop the intellect. From these two harsh and cruel masters I first learned the science of dissimulation. I was humiliated on your account; what could I do to harm you? Nothing. I waited, I observed; the extragavant praises lavished upon you, filled me with a violent desire to compensate by art, by hypocritical grace, by the most studied coquetry, for those advantages in which I was deficient, and which were so much admired in you. When I was fifteen years of age, I thought you beautiful, much more beautiful than I was: not being able to vie with you in beauty, I promised myself one day to dispute the palm with you by my expressive features, by grace, and fashionable appearance. Your beauty was of a chaste and serene description; I wished to be inviting—provoking; but the moment had not arrived.

"One day, I cried with rage while thinking of the brilliant future which awaited you, and on the sorrowful fate reserved to me. By accident, I cast my eyes upon a looking-glass, and I perceived that tears became me almost as well as laughing and boisterous hilarity. I therefoee resolved to become, far a while, sorrowful, melancholy, sentimental. You were rich, I was poor; you were lauded to the skies, I wes borne down with contempt; nothing would appear more natural or more interesting than the part I intended to play—that of a resigned victim. I married, and so did you; you had all the requisites for selecting, and you did select a delightful husband. The same good fortune still follows you after marriage; beautiful, rich, young, titled enjoying a reputation without stain, an idol of the world, which has no admiration but for your beauty, no praise but for your virtues, you cannot form a wish, ere it is realized: this is your life. Is this happiness enough?" added Ursula, with an expression of anger and envy, which convinced me that she truly thought me the happiest of women.

I was, for a moment, on the point of undeceiving her, thinking thus to disarm her. I wished to tell her the anguish I had suffered during the first months of our marriage; the calumnies of which I had been the victim. But it appeared to me, that it would be cowardly to do so, and I merely said: "It is, then, because you think me very happy, that hate me so bitterly?"

"Yes, just so. When I compare your existence with my own, I envy you, I suffer. Why is there this distinction between us? Why is it, that there is not advantage which you do not enjoy? not a quality, not a virtue, for which you are not admired? I had forseen it, and your aunt has unceasingly repeated it to me, since her arrival here; at Paris, in the society which you frequent, they know only you, they swear only by you. You are, at once, the woman most in vogue, and most respected. Every body cites you as the model of grace and elegance, and no one can reproach you with a fault, not even coquettishness; and that in the most calumniating world, the most difficult to please. While I, on the contrary, I live in the country, with an obscure merchant, whom I cannot influence except by affecting vulgarities, which are revolting to my tastes and former habits. And this is not all: you must, forsooth, come to probe the disgraceful wounds of an existence already but too cruel! and then, immediately on our arrival, both my husband and his mother must stun me with your praises, as Mademoiselle de Maran did formerly. Oh! you are, doubtless, an incomparable woman; but your insolent happiness may not always prove invulnerable!"

Anger and jealousy had, at that moment, such dominion over Ursula, that she did not perceive the sort of stupor into which I was thrown. In hearing her speak thus, of my "insolent happiness," I at once comprehended words which Mademoiselle de Maran had often repeated to me, "I am faithful to our agreement; I do not say a word about those Lugarto horrors to your cousin: on the contrary, I tell her incessantly that you have always been the happiest of women; that your fate is envied by all, and that the good as well as the wicked have but one feeling toward you, and that is adoration."

I was no longer surprised. With her accustomed perfidy, Mademoiselle de Maran had done all she could to exasperate the jealousy of my cousin, by drawing a picture of my life in colors as glowing, as they had, in truth, been dark and gloomy.

Seeing Ursula so unworthily irritated at my supposed happiness, I reflected how joyful she would be, could she but penetrate my real misfortunes; **and I** felt, less than ever, disposed to give her that satisfaction.

"This is, then, the secret of your hatred! at least you have acknowledged it. What are now your designs? Do you intend to take my husband from me? Is that the revenge you mean to take upon me?"

"Situated as we now are, you cannot calculate, I presume, upon my imparting my projects to you?" replied Ursula, haughtily.

"As it is not difficult for me to guess at them, I will tell you my irrevocable determination. I am going to write to your husband to return here in all haste; upon his arrival I shall avow my suspicions, which I shall still be pleased to call unfounded, and I shall entreat him to take you home; hereafter, I shall consider you my most dangerous enemy. I have no longer any reason for screening you; I shall, therefore, not conceal from my husband, what passed at Rouvrai, between you and M. Chopinelle."

"You wish for war, Matilda? Well then, war! All means are good, when they are successful I hope to prove it to you."

And Ursula left me to myself.

CHAPTER VI.

RETURNING AFFECTION

After Ursula had left the room, my first impulse was to go in search of my husband, for the purpose of acquainting him with the conversation I had just had with my cousin. Unfortunately, Gontran had gone out early in the morning sporting

I desired Blondeau to let me know when he returned. The breakfast bell rang, but Gontran had not come in. I found Mademoiselle de Maran in the parlor; she asked me where my cousin was. I replied, that I suppose she was in her own room. We sent to call her, but she was not there. The morning was very fine, and I imagined that she might be walking in the park. The bell was rung a second time, but she did not make her appearance.

All at once an idea struck me that she might have gone to meet Gontran; but the servant told me that my husband had gone out on a pony with one of his gamekeepers and his dogs to shoot in the marshes.

This quieted me; and I sat down to breakfast with my aunt. She did not spare me, but kept continually making spiteful remarks on the absence of Ursula and my husband.

My mind was so fully occupied, that her perfidious insinuation, which, under any other circumstances would have annoyed me considerably, were almost unheeded.

On leaving the table, I pretended that I had letters to write before the arrival of the post, and that I should go to my own room. I left Mademoiselle de Maran occupied with her knitting.

The clock struck two; neither Ursula nor Gontran had returned. I sent for Blondeau, and desired her to ascertain, from Ursula's maid, if her mistress had given her any orders. Blondeau came back, and told me that Madame Secherin had taken a book from the library, and had gone out to walk.

I traversed the park in every direction, but could not see anything of Ursula; a small door leading into the forest was open: my cousin must have gone out that way. She had perhaps, the evening before, arranged to meet Gontran. This idea alarmed me. I attached great importance to Ursula's not seeing my husband till after I had spoken to him.

My heart sank within me as I returned to the chateau. Mademoiselle de Maran told me that she began to be seriously uneasy about Ursula; that I ought to send some of the servants to search for her, as she might perhaps have missed her way. Just at that moment, my cousin came in.

She saluted me with as much cordiality as though the scene which had passed between us in the morning had not taken place. Her color heightened, her eyes were sparkling; there was an air of ptide and triumph exhibited in every feature.

Her silk boots, nearly covered with dust, showed that she had walked some distance; the strings of her straw hat, which was lined with crimson silk, were untied, and floated on her shoulders; and the long tresses of her brown hair rather out of curl descended to her neck. She held in one hand a large bunch of wild flowers. She told Mademoiselle de Maran and me that she had gone out of the park, and had nearly lost herself in the forest; but, finding the weather beautiful, she had wished to take advantage of or of the last fine days of autumn, and had amused herself by gathering flowers; she did not think of retracing her steps until she had walked at least a good league. She had met with a wood-cutter, who had shown her the way back to the chateau.

This recital, uttered in a plain and natural manner, dispelled my justly-awakened misgivings. I believed Ursula much the more readily, because, about half an hour after her return, and just as our letters were brought by the post, the game-keeper, who had accompanied my husband, was sent by him to tell me, that his sporting had been prolonged more than he had expected; but that I need not be uneasy, as he would return in the evening to dinner.

I questioned the game-keeper, who told me he had been with my husband all the morning, and had left him about half an hour before at the spring road, where he was still shooting. These particulars quite reassured me.

I thought it so important to see my husband before he met with Ursula, that I again requested Blondeau to be on the look-out for his arrival, and to bring him to my room; telling him that I had to speak with him on the most important matters. Having given this order, I returned to the drawing-room.

I found Mademoiselle de Maran reading, with much attention, some letters which had arrived for her from Paris. I do not know whether she perceived that I had entered the room or not; but she did not take her eyes off the letter she was reading, and cried out every now and then, with apparent astonishment—"Good Heavens! who could ever have believed it? why, they would have administered the sacrament to her without confession—what will all this come to? Must I inform him of it, or must I conceal it from him? It is really dreadful!"

Out of patience with these continued exclamations, and not supposing that my aunt did not see me come into the room, I said to her—"Have you good news from Paris, madam?" But she, without answering me, or appearing to have heard what I said, continued talking to herself: "What scandal this will create! but on the other side, how can it be prevented? How fortunate it is that I should be here to put all this to rights!"

These last words of my aunt aroused my fears, and set me thinking. I could not conceive their import; but a secret presentiment warned me, that her arrival at Maran was connected with some treacherous designs, and that her fears of the Paris revolutionists were a mere pretext.

I drew close to her, and this time repeated in a tone so loud, that she could no longer feign not to have heard me—"Have you good news from Paris madam?" She started, as if surprised; and replied—"How! were you there? did you hear what I said?"

"I heard what you said, but I could not understand anything that I heard."

"So much the better—so much the better—the time is not yet come. Oh? my God! my God! can it be possible?" she exclaimed, raising her hands to heaven.

"You seem much agitated, madam: I will leave you."

"Agitated! I believe you. There is good cause for agitation. You will learn the reason but too soon."

"That may then interest me, madam."

"Interest you—interest you? Yes, more than you may think! Alas! you see me astounded by it—as it were, all upset by it; but I cannot yet believe it. No, no; it cannot be: you are incapable of such a thing."

"Incapable of what, madam? is this some fresh uneasiness you wish to cause me? Pray explain yourself."

"Explain myself! can I possibly do that in the absence of your husband? We must wait for him; and then I don't know if I dare! Tell me, is he still as violent as he was said to be before his marriage? If so, we must be famously cautious."

I looked at my aunt with firmness. "I should have been greatly surprised, madam, if your arrival had not been signalized by some painful occurence. I am resigned to every thing, and I place my trust in the heart of my husband."

"Oh! well—if that's the case, so much the better. I may then abridge my oratorical precautions. You are perfectly right to place your trust in the heart of your husband—it is a very ingenious idea; but notwithstanding all that, I would have you beware of his first impulse upon hearing it; and, above all, take care not to be alone with him; for, alas! poor child! I am very weak and very old, and I could not defend you."

"Defend me! against whom?"

"Against your husband! for, in spite of myself, I cannot help thinking that

[illegible]

Prince de Ksernika has often beaten the lovely Princess de Kseruika, his wife, to a mummy, for much less than this."

"I see with pleasure, madam, by these exaggerations, that you are putting a sorry joke upon me."

"A joke! Heaven preserve me! You will soon find that nothing can be more serious! All that I can do—all that I ought to do, as a near relation, is to interpose, should things be carried too far."

I knew my aunt too well, to hope that she would explain herself, or put an end to these mysterious inuendoes! I therefore answered, with a calmnies which much mortified her: "Deign to excuse my leaving you, madam; for I must go and dress for dinner."

"Go! go! my dear; and make yourself as lovely as possible. That sometimes disarms the most furious. The beautiful Princess de Ksernika understood this thoroughly; and never failed to do so. She always pranked herself out most brilliantly, when she wish to avert the conjugal storm. She made her appearance with a triumphant and flaunting air; and by thus decorating herself so bravely, she avoided having more than one limb broken at a time, y this dear and worthy prince."

I left the room, without stopping to hear the termination of these odious pleasantries of Mademoiselle de Maran. I went up stairs to my own apartment, to await Gontran. On his return from shooting, he came to me immediately, as I had requested.

I was struck with his radiant and joyful look;—he, whom I had observed for many days, so pensive and melancholy. On coming into my room, he embraced me tenderly, and said, "Pardon! a thousand pardons, my dear Matilda! for having, perhaps, made you uneasy; but I allowed myself, like a child, to be carried away by the pleasures of the chase; and, as usual, calculated upon your indulgence."

These apologies from my husband surprised me; for a long time he had not made me any. "I am delighted," said I, "that your sport has been so interesting. You appear less thoughtful than for some days past."

"Nothing can be more simple; you know that sometimes the veriest trifles produce great effect upon us. This morning, when I went out upon my pony, I was in a badhumor, I commenced my sport almost mechanically, and without experiencing any satisfaction. The sky was visited by fogs. Suddenly, a brilliant ray pierced through the clouds; nature seemed to lighten up, to smile. I know not why—but I brightened, also, with the sun's appearance, for I had been morose; and, all at once, I became gay and happy. Happy and gay, as at the age of twenty—happy and gay, as on the day when you first said, 'I love you!' Look above, and compare, if you would still, like me, preserve the remembrance of that happy day!"

It was true. I had never in my life seen my husband's countenance bear a more striking or a more indescribable look of happiness; and I replied to him, without being able to conceal my surprise, "Truly, your features seem radiant with joy, and recall to mind most brilliant days."

"Oh, yes," replied he, passionately; my happiness is immense; its splendour overwhelms me; it radiates on all around me. Were my life depending on it, I could not hide the happiness I feel."

"Blessed be that ray of sunshine, dearest Gontran, since it has had the power to change you thus."

Gontran looked smilingly upon me. "I cannot avoid confessing all to you," said he. "It is not merely that ray of sunshine, which has worked so great a change in me; there was also a ray of moral sunshine, which helped to dissipate my gloominess of soul. Is it then necessary that I should tell you, my own beloved angel! that it was your adored idea that brought about this miracle?"

"And was it really so, my Gontran? tell me."

"I asked myself, why it was that my gloomy melancholy thus contrasted with the brilliancy of nature. I asked myself, whether I did not possess all that rendered life adorable; if I did not owe all this to a beloved woman, the most beautiful, the best, the most generous, of all created beings that ever devoted themselves to make man happy. But this, said I, is not all; a new pledge of love, a new bond, is about to unite us still more closely. And yet I am gloomy, I am sorrowful, and I do not with delight enjoy each moment of such an existence as this. Then it appeared to me, Matilda; I awoke at once from an oppressive dream!"

"Oh, Gontran, Gontran! can this be true?"

"Oh, yes; I speak the truth: happiness renders us so confiding, so sincere. Once in the right path your dear remembrance had opened to me, I did not fear, Matilda, to investigate the primary cause of that senseless gloom, which had again overwhelmed me for some days. There was still another, though a trivial cause. Shall I avow it to you? Yes, I will have the courage to acknowledge it. I was fool enough to feel annoyed by the incessant railleries of your cousin. Yes; like a schoolboy, like a country lout, I felt a rancorous spite at her scoffing at my declarations. I saw in it a blow, not to my love, for you possess that wholly, but to my self-love Happily, when thinking of Matilda, and the little angel which is to bless our future years, I chased away those evil thoughts; and I return to you, more tender, more captivated, more passionately fond, than ever." And my husband kissed my hands with an enchanting grace.

I thought it was a dream. I could not believe what I had heard was real. What sudden change in Gontran's mind had produced this wonderful effect? His words seemed natural and sincere. He invoked the thought of our child with so serious an emotion. I could not think that he spoke falsely. And what could be his object?

His unexpected happiness, joined to the various emotions of the day, so overpowered me, that I sank into an arm-chair. I placed my head upon my hands, and leaning forward to collect my anxious thoughts, after a short silence, I said to Gontran, "Let me entreat your pardon now, my dear husband, if I do not seem to respond to your enchanting kindness; but although so pleasing, my surprise is too profound to allow me, at the moment, to find words capable of expressing all my gratitude."

I felt greatly embarrassed. I believed in the returning affection of my husband. I could not decide whether I ought to impart to him the conversation that had taken place with Ursula, her cruel confessions, and the threats she had uttered in regard to himself.

By way of ascertaining his feelings on this subject, I said to him: "By the by, M. Secherin left Maran this morning; were you aware of it, dear Gontran?"

"I knew of it. Why did not his wife accompany him? It would have been an excellent opportunity for her to fulfil her promise," observed Gontran, in a most natural tone. "She ought to have done," added he, in a reproachful tone, "out of a regard for you, since I told her that your peace of mind depended almost on her leaving us."

"Perhaps," said I, endeavouring to smile, the better to conceal my emotion "perhaps she now repents having shown herself so cruel towards you as to have rejected your attentions. Perhaps her disdain was a mere affectation."

"Oh, then so much the worse for her," said Gontran, gayly, to me. "She has allowed the devil's quarter of an hour to slip by, as the saying is, and now it is too late. My guardian angel is now with me, and she has too much beauty and too much goodness, not to preserve and defend me from all witchcraft."

"You are now very confident, my dear Gontran," said I, still smiling but my cousin is very subtle, very seducing, and your poor Matilda——"

"Oh, my poor Matilda!" said Gontran, with an accent full of tenderness; "my poor Matilda is a little scoffer. Instead of putting on that humble and resigned air, she ought to perceive, that from this moment she is my sovereign mistress. Look you; I do believe, between ourselves, that this poor Matilda has some supernatural intelligence within, I know not what good and invisible genii, who, with a breath, can change a storm to calm, sorrow to peace and serene happiness. She has merely made a sign to them, and my soul is inundated with felicity. My poor Matilda reminds me, in fine, of those fairies who long hide their power, to reveal it some day in all its majesty and splendour; and I should apprehend, hereafter, to become too much her slave, if to obey her were not to reign. But I leave you, my lovely guardian angel; deck yourself out in most becoming garments; make yourself lovely; that we may, by an exchange of looks and glances at your cousin, say to each other, "That poor Ursula!""

Gontran kissed my forehead, and left me in a state bordering on enchantment.

CHAPTER VII.

RUMOURS OF THE WORLD.

Now that I reflect, in cold blood, on my husband's words, I do no understand how I could have put any confidence in their sincerity; or how Gontran's return, so abrupt, so affectionate, and, at the same time, so strange, I might even say, fabulously explained, should not have awakened my suspicion.

But at that time I was ignorant, that the most passionate protestations are often but veils for perfidy and treason.

And, moreover, I was so happy and so eager to discover some good feelings yet existent in my husband's heart, that I gave myself up blindly to this unexpected happiness. I reckoned alone on my own shrewdness and penetration, for the discovery of Ursula's intentions.

Dinner passed very gayly. Mademoiselle de Maran made not the least illusion in reference to the indirect threat which she had offered me. Ursula overpowered me with attentions. On his part, too, Gontran was so full of little courtesies, and so affectionate toward me, that my aunt several times joked him about it.

When dinner was ended, my cousin said to me, "Ah, how happy you must be, to pass the summer and a portion of the winter in the country."

"Well, well," replied Madamoiselle de Maran, "it seems to me that it is a happiness of which you too have your share. For surely it must be a great pleasure to that excellent man M. Secherin, to know that you are here enjoying yourself to the utmost, It was so kind of him also to take the trouble to bring you hither."

"Doubtless, madame," said Ursula; "but we cannot always have what we desire. In this case, as soon as my husband returns hither (and I have just written to hurry him in doing so), his business will oblige him to go to Paris, and I shall naturally accompany him thither."

"Good heavens!" cried my aunt; "this is quite a new whim, this. Before his departure, he said that you might remain here until the month of January, and that you need not return to Paris but with Gontran and Matilda."

"Yes, madam; but one of his correspondents at Paris, whose letter I have received (for I open all my husband's letters during his absence," said Ursula, with a smile), informs me, that his presence is indispensably necessary for the establishment of a banking-house, in which M. Secherin has become a partner, as he told you. So that I have but four or five days now to spend with you, my dear Matilda. Once in Paris, our circles of society will be entirely different. I, the humble banker's wife; you, the brilliant Viscountess de Lancry: we shall see each other but rarely. It will be, in fact, almost a total separation."

"But I thought you were going to live together in Paris, and to keep up this beautiful model of a united and joint-stock establishment," said Mademoiselle de Maran. "Are all these fine resolutions again altered?"

"Unfortunately, they were but school-girls' dreams, impossible to be realized, madadame,"(said Ursula, smiling; "and although I confess that it is not without reluctance that I consent to abandon these hopes, I nevertheless submit."

"Therefore, you must frankly confess," said my husband, gayly, "that the picture I made you of the only suite of rooms which we can give up to you, did not tempt you very much."

"You are very unjust, my dear cousin; we could have accommodated ourselves with much less than you offered us, in order to enjoy the society of our dear relatives. But the *faubourg St. Honore* is so far from my husband's place of business, that it would not suit him at all to live there."

Dinner being now at an end, we rose from the table. Gontran gave his arm to Mademoiselle de Maran, and passed out before Ursula and myself.

The latter, as she entered the drawing-room, said to me, in a low voice:

"This is the way I revenge myself: are you satisfied?"

When the servants had carried round the coffee, Mademoiselle de Maran assumed a very grave and solemn air, and said:

"Now that we are alone, and in a family party, we can talk with open hearts."

And as she said this, she drew from her pocket several letters, which she had that morning received from Paris, and cast a glance toward me, full of ironical and bitter spite.

"What is that that you are going to tell us, madame?" said Gontran.

"You shall know; but first of all you must promise me to be calm, and not allow yourself to be carried away by any sudden passion. But now that I think of it, go and see that no one has remained in the dining-room."

Ursula ran, opened the door, and returned.

"There is no one there, madame."

"But, once more, what is the use of all these precautions?" asked Gontran.

"Bonaparte used to say, that people all wash their dirty linen within doors. Examine the phrase in reference to the sentiment it contains, and it is full of good sense. But before I begin," said Mademoiselle de Maran, turning to Ursula, "I must explain to you, my dearest, the reason of the apparent contradiction between what I am about to say, and what I have already told you."

"How so, madame?"

"I had agreed with Matilda, not to mention the horrible slanders of which she had been the victim, or the frightful griefs which poisoned the first months of her marriage. Up to this time, therefore, I have represented your cousin to you as the most perfectly happy of created beings. Alas! there is nothing in all this—absolutely nothing! On the contrary, you will now see and perceive, that since she has been married—except a little portion of the honeymoon—the whole life of our poor Matilda has been nothing but one long scene of agony—and that is but a trifle compared to that which fate has in store for her in future!"

While Mademoiselle de Maran was thus speaking, Ursula gazed in my face with an expression of surprise which increased every moment. Had I not been so often deceived by her hypocrisy, I should almost have believed that she looked at me with feelings of real interest.

"But once for all, madam—what is all this about?" said Gontran impatiently.

"My poor Gontran!" she answered, "you will know it but too soon—for it concerns you in the first degree; and concerns you when it is too late!—for the evil I conceive to be irremediable. But, first of all, you must give me your word of honor as a gentleman, not to believe above half of what I shall tell you; and to gvie their due weight to circumstances and to slanders. After all, it was I who brought up your wife; and for my sake as well as hers, you must not be in too urgent a hurry to judge unfavorably from appearances. Let us consider—let us weigh well the arguments for and against, and after that we will make up our minds."

It was impossible for me to guess the end at which Mademoiselle de Maran was aiming; but I had so perfect a confidence in my own uprightness, that I was not the least uneasy; although I expected some malicious wickedness from her lips.

"Since it relates to me, madam," said I, "I will request you to abridge these preliminaries and come directly to the fact."

"Come! I like this—your generous impatience re-assures me, and I regard it as a good omen. Well then, M. de Lancry, do you know what is the rumour—or rather what is much more unpleasant—the conviction of those persons of our class, whom the revolution has not driven out of Paris?"

"No, madam, I do not."

"Then I will tell you—they are convinced—in fact they know, that before going to Rouval to visit her cousin, your wife went clandestinely to pass a night in M. Lugarto's country-house; and that it is perfectly understood, that the handsome Alcander of the stars, or the field argent, was there alone likewise—which may pass very well for a nocturnal assignation."

Mademoiselle de Mara darted at me, with these words, a glance malignant as that of the viper when about to strike! I turned pale at her spiteful words.

"Dear! dear!" she exclaimed, "see this poor little darling! She is quite overpowered already! Ah! good Heavens! now I regret bitterly that I mentioned it! But, at the same time, she seemed so confident of herself. Ursula—quick! give her some salts: here is my smelling bottle!"

Ursula drew near to me, with a protecting air of half triumphant pity. But I repulsed her; quietly saying, that I required nothing. This first blow was indeed terrible! I was not in the least prepared for it and I was for the moment dumb. My husband, who, for one second, had turned crimson, either with anger or astonishment recovered himself instantly, burst into a violent fit of laughter, and cried out: "What! Mademoiselle de Maran! you, too? Do you give in to such scandals? I am not at all surprised, that my poor Matilda should be astounded at such things. Who could dream of hearing such wicked folly?"

I eagerly considered, in my own mind, the means of exculpating myself, and at the same time keeping Gontran's secret. Mademoiselle de Maran seemed very much astonished by Gontran's indifference, as he heard this accusation.

"But wait a little, you bad fellow, before you laugh so—wait till I tell you all the facts which are circulated. It is said, first of all, that your wife passed the night in the house of Monsieur Lugarto. Now some people insist, and believe firmly, that she did so willingly, and for love! This seems to me rather a forced opinion, since it would make my niece out a most worthless creature. Others, on the contrary, assert that this dear little creature went, in all virtue and all honor, to redeem—God knows at what ransom—some paper or other, which might have destroyed your character, my dear Gontran! Therefore let me observe, my children, that, in all this matter, I am neither more nor less, than as innocent as the nymph, Echo."

I could no longer doubt that M. Lugarto had kept his word. To avenge himself, he had written, either to Mademoiselle de Maran, or to some of her acquaintances, several versions of the events of that fatal night, which would suffice to ruin my reputation, or dishonor Gontran.

Falsehood and truth were so fatally confounded, so perfidously commingled in this atrocious calumny; that the world, with its wonted indifference and ill-nature, would naturally receive it without examination.

I scarcely dared lift my eyes to Gontran, so fully did I expect some violent outbreak of passion on his part; and my astonishment was equalled only by the disappointment of Mademoiselle de Maran, when my husband conquering a new and brief expression of strong feeling, shrugged up his shoulders, and replied with the most perfect sang froid:

"When it comes to this, madam, it ceases to be calumny, it becomes mere folly. And in truth, the times in which we live are too grave, for people to amuse themselves by putting forth such stupid absurdities.'

"What!" cried my aunt, "is it thus that you take these news?—a plague on your philosophy!"

"One can be a philosopher very cheaply, madam," replied Gontran; "if we can gain that title by setting at nought stupid rumors, which lack even that degree of consistency necessary to constitute them calumnies! Matilda ought not to care the least about such idiotcy. In two words, I will tell you the sad circumstances—owing to which, the name of M. Lugarto, may have unhappily been brought in contact with that of Madame de Lancry. That man basely abused the intimacy of his friendship with me, in order to attempt to injure the reputation of Madame de Lancry. I answered that baseness as I ought, by giving him the lie, and boxing his ears before twenty persons. A meeting took place, in which I gave him a sword-thrust; and, on the following day, I set off for England, whither I was called by matters of weighty business.

"Immediately on my departure, Matilda left Paris, to come to her cousin's house, where she proposed to pass the time of my absence. When I returned from London, I rejoined her there, and brought her hither. This, madam, is the whole truth. As to the ridiculous inventions which people have given themselves the trouble to circulate, and to which you think it necessary to call our attention, I repeat it to you, I should not have considered it worth while to give them the lie; I should never have thought about them for an instant, if Matilda had not been such a child as to appear annoyed for a minute or two. In this, hower, she is excusable. She has barely entered the world; her pure and ingenuous soul is yet liable to the impression of miseries, which hereafter will excite but her disgust." Then addressing me, Gontran said, with an accent of the tenderest affection—"Pardon me, my poor Matilda! my unhappy connection with Lugarto gives you much uneasiness; but this, I trust, will be the last of it."

I was moved, indeed, very deeply, by the simple and dignified language of Gontran. Since the beginning of the conversation, the face of my cousin had appeared singularly abstracted; indeed, its whole expression seemed- to be altered.

Mademoiselle de Maran, despite her assurance, was disconcerted; she looked from me to Ursula, from Ursula to my husband, to see if she could penetrate the causes of Gontran's indifference, or moderation—moderation which scarce astonished so much as it affected me; for my husband must naturally have been wounded by some of Mademoiselle de Maran's remarks.

After this silent watch, which she maintained for several seconds, my aunt began again, with a reflective air:

"You are right, Gontran; you do not allow yourself to be hurried away. You will perceive, that all I ask in the world is the power of being able to disbelieve every word of what I read in my letters, and to answer, by giving them the lie direct. But on the other hand, what says the proverb? 'There is never smoke without fire!' Well, let us see! Between us, what could have created this atrocious slander? How can we suppose that grave and serious people who write to me—should amuse themselves in inventing this night-journey of Matilda to M. Lugarto's, if there had been no truth at all therein? After all, you must know better than any one—in the first place, whether M. Lugarto ever had in his possession the means of dishonoring you; secondly, whether he is a person likely to have deprived himself of his only means of injuring you, for the mere pleasure of doing a good action? As for me, I confess, I look upon it as somewhat problematical, hypothetical—not to say quite absurd—to think of a creature of his kind, perpetually snarling and doing evil, acting in that manner."

The infernal spite of Mademoiselle de Maran was now, perhaps, serving her purpose, even though she knew it not. It was impossible that she could have more fiercely provoked the suspicions of Gontran, touching the surrender of the forgery, which M. Lugarto must seem to him to have made voluntarily.

Although my husband could not raise this question with me—thinking as he did that I was completely ignorant of his base conduct—I had always remarked that he must discern something mysterious in its return to him by M. Lugarto.

"Did Mademoiselle de Maran then know all?" This question I could not at that moment answer. Nevertheless, I now expected to hear a violent outbreak from Gontran. I was, therefore, almost frightened, when I saw that he listened to Mademoiselle de Maran with the same careless quiet; that he shrugged his shoulders as she ceased to speak, and answered—

"This, indeed, can be regarded hardly in the light either of a slander, or a folly. It falls into the romantic, into the supernatural. Is this all, madam? Do your correspondents tell you nothing further? It is a pity that they should stop in so beautiful a path."

"Certainly not. This is not all?" cried my aunt, no longer able to contain her rage. "I told you that all the most respectable people were convinced. I will tell you now what will be the consequences of this conviction. They will be charmingly agreeable to you doubtless. For, although you look upon them as romantic and supernatural, they will not hinder yourself and your wife from being pointed at wherever you go, and from not receiving one bow in return for ten that you shall make! Does this astonish you? You will, perhaps, say now, that this is magic; nothing, however, can possibly be more simple. I will explain this to you, always according to my humble judgment. People will either believe that your wife has sacrificed her honor to preserve yours, and so you will pass for a miserably poor devil—or, they will believe that she yielded to her passion for Lugarto, and, therefore, will regard her as infamous, without taking into consideration, that, even in this view of the case, they will still look upon you as the basest of men; seeing that you tolerated this passion, either because you owed money to the villians, or, because, as your wife brought you all the fortune you enjoy, you judged it most politic and economical to shut your eyes to her conduct."

"Truly, madam; will they believe all this?" said Gontran.

"To be sure they will; this is what all good people do believe now—all inoffensive people—in short, all your friends!"

"And what do our enemies believe, madam?"

"Ah! ah! ah!—your enemies! That is a very different matter! Your enemies believe that you and Matilda understand yourselves as well as two thieves at a fair. They say, 'If there had been but one guilty person in the family, whether the man or the woman, there would have been a split between them. An honorable woman does not continue to live with a dishonored man. She may sacrifice her honor, perhaps, to save that of her husband; but the sacrifice once made, she disowns him. If she continues to live with him, she becomes his accomplice. On the other hand, no honorable man lives with a wife who has degraded him. If he has no fortune, he lives in the utmost want, rather than suffer it to be suspected that he lives with an adultress from mean and interrested motives.' This, I say, is the conclusion to which your enemies will come—those slanderous and unmannered tongues—when they see that you remain on so good terms together. They will beliere that you have the most infamous toleration, each for the other's vices."

"In a word—in a word, madam, I can guess the whole truth now," I replied; "madam, your hatred has carried you a little too far! You have betrayed yourself in your own despite? Praise be to God, who has revealed the secret enmities which beset us!"

"How—how is this?" cried Mademoiselle de Maran; "this poor little thing is mad."

"Gontran! Gontran! I have been asking myself, on what account my father's sister could possibly have come hither? She tells you now herself. Yes, madam, I now understand the whole. You wish, by your calumnies, to awaken terrible discussions between us, and so to sever us! In truth, madam, that would have been a grand triumph for you. We have been married hardly a year, and a separation would infallibly destroy either myself or Gontran; for it would give authority to the basest rumours."

The contraction of Mademoiselle de Maran's eyebrows proved to me that my blow had taken effect. She began therefore, as was her custom, to laugh violently, in order to conceal her rage.

"Ha! ha! ha! How amusing she is with her suppositions—the dear little thing! But, little fool that you are, do you think that I am talking to you in my own name? I came as a good and sincere relation—do not forget this, I beseech you—to tell you, my dear children, to be on your guard. This is what is actually believed. It is not a mere rumour—a piece of gossip—an invention—it is the conviction of serious and grave persons, whose word has the greatest weight in society. How will the world interpret your conduct thus, since it is impossible to take this conviction away from it? since you are dishonored—if not both, at least one or the other of you—I come as a good and sincere relation."

Gontran here interrupted Mademoiselle de Maran, by saying to her:

"It seems to me, Madam, that the world will have a much easier and more natural mode of accounting for the fact—that Madame de Lancry and myself continue to live together—by believing simply that we live together as honorable people generally do—that, having nothing with which to reproach one another, we utterly despise these atrocious calumnies; and that we have too much good sense to give up our happiness, in consequence of the first hateful scandal we encounter. This explanation, too, would have the advantage of being the only one, at the same time, possible and true—which, to my thinking, is no small advantage. To resume, madam; I partake in no degree, the suspicions, or mistrusts of Matilda. The poor thing has suffered already so deeply by pitiless slanders, that in her blind resentment, she may for a moment, have confounded you with them. She is mistaken, I doubt not; speaking to us as you do, you but yield to the interest with which we inspire you. Complete then your kindness, and give us your advice as to what we must do in order to convince our friends, that they are but the dupes of empty slander, and to convict our enemies of infamy."

"My good nephew," said Mademoiselle de Maran, furiously, "I give advice no longer—the hour for that is passed; but I divine and predict. Listen to me, then—if you are curious about the present and the future, listen to me, then. In your nice little establishment, the one of you is the dupe and victim, the other the cheat and executioner. A rupture will become necessary to you at last, and that even earlier than you imagine, because, at last the victim will rebel! But this separation, my dear children, will be too late—much too late! The world has got into the way of looking upon you as two accomplices! It will continue to despise you. This separation, therefore which might once have saved the reputation of one or the other of you, will now be but a new charge against you. People will take you then for a pair of rogues so desperately wicked, that you cannot contrive to live together. This appears very funny to you, unquestionably; and I am, in your opinion, doubtless, a mad woman. Well! you will come and tell me one day whether I am mistaken: one word more, and then we will let the matter drop. This horrible revolution so terrified and scattered all my friends, that I have seen very few persons, and knew little or nothing about this. When, however, some whispers began to reach my ears, I begged your uncle, M. de Versac, and M. de Blancourt, two of my oldest friends, to be on the watch—to inquire, and to write me word what they should hear said, or should know to have been said. Here are the letters, read them; you will see if I have invented anything. Now, not a word more on the subject. Let us make up a whist party, if you please. If Matilda is too much tired, we will make a dumby with you and Ursula. All this turns out admirably well—you are well satisfied, and I submit cheerfully, my good nephew. So much the better—I am very glad of it, I feel proud of it; I glorify myself like a proud peacock!—for, tell me, what do you suppose I desire?—your happiness only! Well then, the more the world despises you the happier you are. That gives me an admirable opportunity of laboring for your happiness—does it not so? Now, then, ring the bell, and call for cards."

I returned to my own room, leaving Ursula, my husband, and Mademoiselle de Maran to play their rubber. That occupation would oblige them at least, to remain silent after the occurrence of so painful a scene.

CHAPTER VIII.

HAPPINESS AND HOPE.

I WAS in extreme perplexity. I knew not whether the calm of Gontran was real or affected. I was again on the point, in spite of the advice of M. de Mortagne, to disclose every thing to my husband concerning that fatal night. But I thought that it was, perhaps, owing to his anxiety to quiet my suspicions respecting that unfortunate forgery, that he appeared so indifferent to the attacks of Mademoiselle de Maran. Aware of the infernal malice of my aunt, I could not conceal from myself, that we had much to fear from the enmity of society. The cold manner in which Gontran had been received a few months before, seemed almost to justify the predictions of Mademoiselle de Maran. I was anxious to know whether Gontran would visit me before retiring. I wished to tell how much I was rejoiced at the departure of Ursula. I attributed the resolution of my cousin, less to any generous feeling, than to the fear that I would inform her husband of my suspicions—as I had already threatened—and thus excite his mistrust for the future. In this particular, I recognized the wisdom of Madame de Richeville's advice.

At about eleven o'clock, Gontran rapped at my door, and entered. I studied his features with considerable solicitude, so much did I fear to discover there a threatening expression. It was not so. His countenance expressed more than its habitual tenderness and affection.

"Oh, my love!" I exclaimed, "how malicious Mademoiselle de Maran is—to come here with the odious purpose of fomenting a quarrel between us, by reporting to us the most abominable calumnies!"

"Without positively believing—as you seem to do—that such was the object of your aunt's journey, I think that she was weary of having no one to torment; and, knowing beforehand the contents of the letters from my uncle and M. de Blancourt, she came to sow seeds of discord between us. You are right, Matilda; Mademoiselle de Maran is more malicious than I thought. Henceforth there will be no necessity for us to see her."

"Oh, my dearest, how kind you are! if you knew what pleasure that promise afforded me! I have always had a presentiment that Mademoiselle de Maran would be the cause of our sorrows."

"Fortunately, in this attempt to injure us, she has been of real benefit, unconscious to herself."

"How so?"

"I have read the letters of my uncle and M. de Blancourt. It is evident that the most false and injurious reports are in circulation respecting us. Malice has taken advantage of a few simple facts, and has terribly distorted them. Thus, because I went to England after some papers which might compromise a third person, it has been reported that Lugarto had documents in his possession which would dishonour me. I do not wish to investigate any farther what could give rise to the absurd report concerning that night which you spent in the house of Lugarto. I know the horror with which he inspired you; but I am insane; it is an insult to you to dwell a moment upon such slanders. This malice of Mademoiselle de Maran will serve to inform us of what our enemies say. This disclosure must effect some change in our projects. It is, therefore, my opinion—if you will consent to it—that we should postpone, for a long time, our return to Paris; not go there before a year or fifteen months—and, in the meantime, remain here. Political events will be an excellent excuse for our absence. I know Paris and its society. In six months we shall be forgotten. Within a year, all these miserable calumnies will have died away. If, on the contrary, we should visit Paris within a few weeks, according to our first intention, we should plunge into the very midst of that universal clamour, which would astonish you less if you knew society better. You are beautiful and virtuous; you love me, and have chosen me, which alone is sufficient to excite all the hatred and jealousy that will not fail to seize upon any thing mysterious in my past relations with Lugarto. If I were alone, I should despise these contemptible reports; but I am responsible for your happiness; and I should be the most culpable of men, if I did not act in such a manner as to save you from new sorrows, where you have already suffered so much on my account. The wisest and the most prudent course which we can adopt is, to postpone indefinitely our return to Paris. What say you, Matilda? Are you of my opinion? I beseech you to reply."

"And how can I do so?" I exclaimed, in a transport of joy, impossible to describe. "Can I answer you, when my heart is beating with surprise and happiness? Do you wish, Gontran, to drive me mad with joy? It is too much felicity, for one day, to find your tenderness restored; to have the certainty of remaining with you here for a long time, instead of returning to Paris—I repeat—it is too great a rapture. I did not solicit so much:" and I could not restrain tears of joy.

"Poor little one!" said Gontran to me; "your surprise is a cruel reproach, and I deserve it too well. I have so long deprived you of happiness, that you weep with joy at the assurance of my love, and the certainty of remaining here for a length of time. It is truly awful, when the thought assails me, that I could have mistaken you for a moment, beloved angel! Why is it, that instead of enjoying the exquisite delicacy of your mind, the adorable kindness of your soul, I have allowed my own heart to harden, while I was surrendering myself to a stupid and brutal existence? Is it a dream, or is it a reality? say, my good guardian angel! Tell me that we fell asleep at Chantilly and awoke at Maran!"

"Speak thus—continue to speak with your sweet enchanting voice," said I to my husband, clasping my hands in ecstasy—"speak thus again; you know not how much good those tender words do me! What a salutary balm they pour into my heart! It seemed to me, Gontran, that our child shuddered with joy—yes, with joy and grief! The poor little being will share all—will henceforth feel all! Therefore I thank you, upon my knees, for it and for myself—I thank you for the happiness which you have caused us!"

I passed the days which succeeded that conversation in one constant enchantment with Gontran. It is impossible for a man to be more affectionate and attentive than my husband was.

Mademoiselle de Maran, seeing that her wicked projects were almost baffled, did not conceal her displeasure: and spoke of her departure, pretending to be comforted by the last news from Paris. Ursula expected her husband every moment. According to her promise, she had written to him, to ask of him to accompany her to Paris, instead of sojourning at Maran, as it had been agreed upon between them.

From the day when she heard Mademoiselle de Maran speak of the calumnies we had to fear, I observed a singular change in the manners of my cousin toward me and Gontran. She was more and more satirical and haughty toward my husband. For myself, during the few fortunate days while we were alone together, she was uneasy, confused; and looked toward me with an expression of interest, which I could not comprehend. I often saw that she was on the point of speaking to me with freedom, as if she had some secret to confide—and then, she would suddenly check herself. I, moreover avoided a private interview as much as possible. I spent my mornings with Gontran. After breakfast, we took long rides in our carriage, during which we exchanged but few words. We dined, and Mademoiselle de Maran's game of whist occupied the evening. Now, since the past has enlightened me, I recollect circumstances which I hardly observed then, because I could not explain their bearing. Although my husband displayed toward me the most perfect kindness after his sudden return, he seemed abstracted and plunged in reveries. At times he showed extraordinary absence of mind; at other times he appeared under the influence of some great surprise, which seemed almost painful—as if he had sought in vain for the solution of some mystery. These impulses of joy which had at first so much astonished me, seemed to have disappeared. Often I saw his features darken with a melancholy expression. I spoke to him of my surprise, and he replied to me with kindness: "It is because I am thinking of the sorrows which I have caused you."

Although those symptoms should have appeared to me very singular, I gave myself but little uneasiness respecting them. Gontran displayed the greatest attention and kindness. He spoke to me constantly of the necessity of remaining at Maran, for one year at least; as much to afford time for the reports to sink in oblivion, as for the purposes of economy, which our future life would demand. I repeat it, I could not then be disturbed concerning the singular abstraction of Gontran, and I feared to displease him by questions on that subject. Doubtless, impelled by an instinct which inclined her to love my enemies, Mademoiselle de Maran seemed to cherish a great affection for Ursula. They often took long walks together. My aunt evidently believed that Gontran had been attentive to Ursula; her perfidious jests addressed to Secherin, had proved it to me. But the marks of affection which Gontran exhibited toward me, and the indifference of Ursula to him, seemed to dispel her suspicions. Gontran had selected certain hours to accompany me on some musical instrument, as formerly. In short, except the inconvenience of having two persons near us who were my enemies, I had never, since the charming days at Chantilly, been more completely happy. That condition of restraint was, however, about to cease. I was soon to be left alone with Gontran and our babe. The last letter which Ursula had received from M. Secherin, to whom she wrote every other day, informed her that he would arrive on the 13th of December. I never shall forget that date. The day finally came. Although M. Secherin was usually very punctual in replying to his wife's letters, she had received no news from him for three days. She was by no means disturbed by his silence; she saw in it a new proof of the proposed arrival of her husband, who would have informed her had he changed his mind. I was sitting at the piano with Gontran. Blondeau came to ask me if I would receive a visit from Ursula. My husband anticipated a refusal, which I intended to give, by saying to me, "She leaves to-day; it is a mere formality of politeness—I will return soon." Although the interview would be extremely disagreeable to me I did not hesitate to follow the advice of my husband. Ursula entered, and we remained together.

CHAPTER IX.

REPENTANCE.

URSULA was sad and serious.

"After what has passed between us," said she to me, "I believe it to be my duty not to depart, without seeing and conversing with you for a moment. My husband will arrive this morning; in an hour hence, perhaps even a final explanation will be impossible."

"An explanation! what good will it do? It is useless."

"Perhaps, for you, it is," said Ursula. "You have nothing to reproach yourself with, in your conduct towards me: while I—I confess it with shame—have been guilty of gross injustice to you."

I looked upon Ursula with suspicion: I expected from her no return of sentiment, but hypocrisy. But I had so often been her dupe, that I no longer feared that I shoud be as weak and confiding as before. One thing, however, astonished me; my cousin did not affect that melancholy and plaintive tone which she ordinarily employed as one of her most irresistible attractions. Her demeanour was cold and calm.

"You have, indeed, wronged me," said I; "but I do not wish to recall your conduct, at the instant you are leaving us. All ties, and friendship between us, are severed; we will hereafter be strangers to each other. I may, perhaps, at some future day, forget the misery you have caused me."

"Do not mistake my motives, in this final interview," said Ursula; "I do not come to ask you to forget my avowal of the envy with which you always inspired me; nor that instinctive aversion to you, which was the consequence."

"Then, why this interview?"

"Listen to me, Matilda. You have already seen me under very different aspects; one day, a woman beseeching, complaining, misunderstood, as you say; and another day, haughty, ironical, insolently coquettish, and advancing the most cynical theories; now condescending to flatter the most vulgar tastes of my husband, and rendering him, after all, as happy as he can be, and as he wishes to be; and then deceiving him without remorse, and making use of the most treacherous hypocrisy to separate him from his mother, who detested me. Well, these moods of my conduct, various as they are, are nothing, compared to the mysteries of my soul; for I there combine quite as many contrasts: thus, I have an immoderate love of luxury, *eclat*, and elegance; I carry my passion for display to such a degree, that—and I confess it with shame—I would have married the most infirm old man to satisfy it. Nevertheless, I had the courageous patience to go and bury myself in a province—there to lead a miserable country life—that my husband might have time to increase his fortune, and thus enable me to expatiate at Paris, in that sumptuous style of living, of which I had always dreamed, and for which I would have sacrificed any thing. I love to rule imperiously: and there are certain conquests, almost brutal in their kind, which I adore. I am false—deceitful—both by nature and by design; and sometimes I have fits of irrational frankness. In truth, I am at once capable of much evil and much good. Oh! do not smile in so incredulous and contemptuous a manner! Yes, Matilda, of much good. At this very moment, I can give you a proof of it. Doubtless, this good is mixed up with much evil, like everything else that is human. But now, I believe, that the good predominates, and you shall judge of it. Eight days since, we had a long interview, and I confessed to you the jealousy with which you inspired me. Yes, I envied you most entirely: young, beautiful, rich, intellectual—imparting an irresistible charm to virtue and to dignity, and fascinating by those very qualities which usually repel. I never saw any one more perfect than you."

"This is flattery."

"Oh! it is not flattery! Matilda. I have been a witness to the power of your fascinations. I have seen you take more pains and lavish more attentions to please one poor, old country dame, than would have been requisite to turn the heads of twenty fops; for you have that inestimable treasure, the coquetry of virtue, in as great perfection as other women have the coquetry of vice. In fine, you have always possessed, as you still possess, all those advantages in which I am deficient. Eight days ago, Matilda, I envied you those advantages, because I believe that you felt an insolent happiness in them—but to day——"

"Well, to-day!" said I to Ursula.

"To-day, I know that you are unhappy. Yes; I know that you are the most wretched of women, and I have no longer the courage to envy you those rare and brilliant qualities. This is a contradiction which you will explain as you are able."

"Your habitual penetration is at fault," said I to Ursula; "for, in truth, for eight days past, while I have seemed so deserving of your pity, I have never been more happy. Never did my husband show me more attention and tenderness."

"We will talk, by and by, of those attentions and tendernesses," said Ursula, with a singular expression. "Let us speak first of the cause which has changed my hatred and jealousy to pity. If you will permit me, I will tell you frankly: Mademoiselle de Maran—I know not for what object, except to excite my envy still more—was pleased to exaggerate your happiness in my eyes, even to the very day when she informed you, in my presence, of the calumnies to which you were subjected. All the time that I seemed to participate in her malice, I remained convinced of one thing: that you were the most upright and noble woman in the world, and that notwithstanding, your reputation, if not entirely lost, was compromised for ever!"

"You are mistaken; truth always comes to light at last."

"Alas! Matilda, do not deceive yourself! Falsehood is so mingled with truth in those events which elicit the unjust judgment of the world, that it is extremely difficult to overthrow it. In a matter of doubt, society does not withhold its sentence—it condemns! Thus, I repeat to you, I am too cruelly revenged for the advantages which I envied."

I was indignant at the kind of commiseration which Ursula affected; her praises were revolting to me. Although what she said to me had but too much an appearance of truth, I did not wish to acknowledge it to her.

"I fully conceive," said I to my cousin, "that it is highly desirable to you to believe that singular reparation of human justice, which tarnishes the reputation of respectable women. But do not be too hasty in your triumph; although you hope the contrary, sooner or later, all are judged according to their merits. You may, therefore, dispense with your pity. As to my qualities, you presume that they will meet such a recompense, and such an end that your praises are but so many sarcasms."

Ursula rejoined, with an imperturbable calmness; "It is precisely because these qualities are so badly recompensed, that I praise them unrestrictedly—you may believe this. As to envying them, I take good care not to do that—they would embarrass me too much," added she, with that smile which was so peculiar to her. "I have not seen more of the world than you have," she rejoined, "but by reflection, I know it better than you will ever know it, whatever you may say. I am convinced, then, that your reputation has received a mortal blow, in spite of your most brilliant virtue."

"Madam!"

"Do not take this repetition as an outrage, Matilda! no, no. And look you," rejoined Ursula after a moment's silence, "you believe me the most false, and most lying of women; thus, instead of being touched with what I am about to say to you, you will again consider me a hypocrite; but no matter—at this moment I am speaking for myself and not for you. Well! how that

I am made acquainted with the horrible grief you have endured—now that I know those which still await you—*truly*—oh! truly, Matilda! I have repented—profoundly repented of the injury which I had intended. I do not dare to say—have inflicted on you."

While pronouncing these last words, the voice of my cousin trembled with emotion. I would have credited her remorse, but I knew her to be so false—so good an actress, that I smiled bitterly, and pushed away the hand which sought to take hold of mine."

"Matilda! do you believe me?"

"No—although your tears will doubtless soon come to your assistance to convince me."

"My tears—no, Matilda—no! this time I shall not weep—for my grief is so profound, so sincere, that to make you believe in it, feigned tears will not be requisite."

Confounded by the boldness of this avowal, I looked at my cousin with surprise. Yes, I will own, I will acknowledge, even if I should be considered stupid—mad—that after so many delusions had been dissipated, after so much deception—I felt moved, touched, in spite of all that had occurred, with the expression of Ursula's countenance at that moment, and with the unspeakable sweetness of her affectionate looks. This expression struck me the more forcibly, because it did not in any way resemble the habitual affectation of my cousin. I believed then, and I now still believe, that she spoke under the influence of a real feeling. I endeavoured, however, with all my strength, to resist the species of fascination.

"Oh! you are the most dangerous of women!" I exclaimed, "leave me! leave me! If indeed real, your regrets are vain; they can no wise extenuate the frightful wrongs you have done me! You have desired to destroy my happiness. I have not been the dupe of the part you have been pleased to act toward my husband; and if he did not entertain for you a con——" The word appeared too harsh to me, I wished not to utter it. Ursula completed it.

"Contempt! you would say, Matilda! Say on—say on. I can—I ought to listen to all that you now——"

"Well! had it depended only upon you, you would have seduced my husband from his allegiance. You would have inflicted the severest injury upon a woman who always wished your welfare, and whom you found already so unhappy—so undeservedly unhappy! even admitting that your feelings are now sincere."

"Yes, they are sincere," rejoined Ursula; "yes, in that interview, at which you were present, without my being aware of it, I fully calculated that, instead of extinguishing the passion of your husband, I, on the contrary, irritated it. as much by my affected indifference as by my raillery and my disdain."

"The passion!" said I, contemptuously shrugging my shoulders; "he entertain a passion for you! Say, then, an inclination—a passing fancy!"

"I say the *passion*, Matilda, because it is a passion of which I am now speaking—do you understand me?—because a passion is the subject."

"A passion! Dare you still say this? What! even now?"

"Do not believe that I desire in any way to wound your self-love. I wish to render you a service, Matilda! to make amends, in part, for the injury I have done you—and, Heaven be thanked! it is still time to do so." The tone of voice in which Ursula spoke was so authoritative, that, in spite of myself, I silently listened to her.

"Yes," she rejoined, "I knew that I was irritating the passion of your husband. This exultation, on my part, ought to reassure you as to the feelings which I bore towards him, but not as to what he then felt toward me, nor what he still feels for me."

"Oh, this is shameful!" exclaimed I; "what odious calumny! This, then, is the farewell you will take? On quitting me, you desire to leave my heart a prey to the most frightful suspicion!"

"Matilda, in pity to yourself, allow me to conclude what I was about to say. My husband may arrive in this moment or the next, and then all further conversation will be impossible."

"In pity to myself?"

"Yes, yes—in pity to yourself, unhappy woman! Hear me! and believe that I am yielding to a generous impulse which may one day, perhaps, afford me consolation for many wicked actions. Hear me then; if not for your own sake, be it then for the sake, at least, of the future welfare of your child!"

"What! do you know that?" cried I, astounded, for I had confided this secret to Gontran only.

"Yes, yes; I know it," replied Ursula, "and this reason above all, while it increases my remorse, has determined me to act as I am acting."

After a moment's hesitation, Ursula, with downcast eyes, her voice much agitated, continued: "You well remember the angry conversation which we had together?"

"Yes, yes: well, what of that?" I exclaimed with anguish, for my heart contracted, with I know not what hateful presentiment, on thinking that my husband had imparted a secret to this woman which was only known between ourselves.

"I do not wish to recriminate," continued Ursula, with increasing emotion, "but at all events, if in that interview I frankly avowed to you the envy with which you had always inspired me, you, Matilda, treated me most pitilessly. You reproached me with a shameful and base intrigue which I will never acknowledge; you reproached me with my perfidies; and I, at that moment, thought you the most happy among women. At that moment, I swear to you, I was ignorant of all that you had suffered; for—remember well, Matilda, that it was only in the evening—only in the evening of that day that I learned, through Mademoiselle de Maran, a part of your misfortunes."

"Speak! in the name of Heaven—speak! Well, after our interview, what happened? But—yes—I recollect, you went to walk in the forest."

"Pardon, Matilda, pardon! I went there to meet your husband; he was waiting for me in an uninhabited cottage, where he had requested me to meet him."

This confession was so unexpected, so full of horror, that, at first I could not believe it. My last hope depended on its falsehood. To believe it, would be to adopt the fatal assurance, that, for the last eight days, Gontran's conduct toward me was one continued tissue of guile and falsehood! To believe it, I must acknowledge to myself, that all the tenderness he had evinced toward me, was but to conceal his intrigue with Ursula.

I could not—I would not, yield up my belief to so hateful a truth! Beside myself with agony, I cried out, "You calumniate Gontran, he spent that day shooting; one of his people came from him to tell me so."

"Yes! that man repeated to you what his master had instructed him to say."

"It was not true, then?—that man lied?"

"Yes! yes! pardon, Matilda! Led away by the hatred which I bore you, wishing to revenge myself upon you by taking your husband from you—I became guilty."

"I tell you that I do not believe you! I tell you that you invent this calumny, to strike me with a fatal blow!"

"I have the courage to inform you of this truth, Matilda! however disgraceful it may be to me, and however painful it may be to you."

"My God! my God! thou hearest her!" exclaimed I, raising my hands to Heaven.

"Pardon, Matilda! for when afterward I was apprised of how unhappy you had been—when afterward I heard from Gontran, you were about to become a mother—poor unhappy woman! that completely disarmed me. I felt a horror of my crime, when I reflected that I had yielded not to love, but to a vile hatred—an execrable feeling of revenge!"

"My God! my God!" cried I, in overwhelming grief, "deprive me of my reason! make me mad! or take my life. I can no longer—I will no longer suffer these horrid torments."

"Matilda! Matilda! pardon! I swear to you, at that moment I did not suspect all the claims you have to interest—to the most tender pity: but, I must have the courage to tell you all. Well, I did not then suspect the odious indifference of your husband to you. No, I could not believe that his love for me, could render him so false, so unjust, so cruel, as he must be toward you: for, alas! you do not know his projects."

"But this is frightful!" exclaimed I; "she runs to her dishonour, and then comes to accuse my husband! What can this woman be? What can he be himself? What am I myself? What is this life? Is it a dream? Is it a horrible reality? And you—you who are standing there before me—you who are now looking at me, whoever you may be—answer me: where am I? Which is the truth? Which is the lie? How is it possible that the affection which Gontran has lavished upon me, for the last eight days, was a mere snare—an insulting falsehood! To what end could such a snare be laid for me? as you were about to leave this place—as you are going to leave it. Oh! this is a chaos in which my head turns round, and is completely lost. I rave! my God! I rave! take pity on me—enlighten me. Ursula, look here — am I sufficiently humbled; am I sufficiently wretched? See me at your feet, Ursula—at your feet!"

"Rise, Matilda, in the name of Heaven! it is I—I who should sue to you for pardon."

"I pardon you—I pardon you—but at least tell me the truth—the whole truth, however horrible it may be. I am a mother. I have not now only myself to care for: giving way to this grief, I shall kill my child. I tell you I will no longer suffer—I will not. If Gontran has so shamefully deceived me, all hope of recovering his love is gone for ever! Well, I would make up my mind to it; I would never see him more; I would remain here alone; and when I have my child, I might again be happy. Therefore, Ursula, have no fears—tell me all—do you hear? absolutely all! your frankness may save my life. Speak! Ursula, speak! a certainty, for the love of God, however dreadful it may be—a certainty! death is better than this agony!"

"Poor woman! poor, unhappy woman!" said Ursula, concealing with her hands her face, bathed in tears.

"Yes; unhappy, most unhappy! is it not so? You no longer envy me now, do you? To persecute me further, would be barbarity. You see, it is impossible to be more unhappy; it is as you desired. Is not your aversion sufficiently appeased?"

"Matilda—ah! I am too much revenged. This is horrible! horrible. Unfortunately, I can do nothing for the past; but I can for the future! Listen to me attentively: Here is a letter that Gontran wrote to me, and here is my answer; I sincerely desire to deliver it to him. It may not extenuate the wrongs I have inflicted, but it proves, at least, that I desire to repair them. In this reply, I exhibit myself in such odious colours, that, notwithstanding my regret at having injured you, I have, till now, hesitated to forward to Gontran letters so disgraceful to myself. Here they are."

And Ursula handed me a sealed package, which I took mechanically.

"Now for one last word, Matilda. I could have hidden from you this cruel confession, gone to Paris, and left you in complete blindness; but when you read your husband's letter, you will learn his projects for the future; and that he entertains toward me an unbridled passion, whose consequences have made me wretched. I have, till now, spoken to you of the wrongs which I have inflicted; now see how it is that I hope in part to repair them. With the letter he wrote to me, you will abash your husband; he will cast himself at your feet and implore a pardon. With the answer that I wrote, you can show him that there remains no hope of his ever seeing me again—moreover, you can revenge yourself for the past, and provide for the future. If I give you even a shadow of jealousy send to M. Secherin, the letter which I have written to Gontran; if you desire to revenge yourself for the past, send these writings immediately to my husband, and it will leave him no doubt of the extent of my fault. I know him—as blind as his goodness and confidence are, he will be merciless to me when he is certain I have betrayed him. He will repudiate me, my father will never receive me; I shall be bereft of resources, and from the dream of opulence, that I was about to realize, I shall fall into a gulf of misery. And you know not, Matilda, what misery may urge me to do. And then," continued Ursula, in a tone of voice nearly solemn, "there must have been something fatal, something providential in what has happened. *I shall never write again:* I am too cautious an adept to do anything which can compromise me. The fault that I committed could have remained hidden, at least, it could not have been proved; nevertheless, I wrote a letter which might ruin me, and I came voluntarily to confide in you. Nothing forced me — you see, then, to put myself in your power—nothing except my remorse for the past, my good resolutions for the future, and my blind confidence in your justice. Nothing could have driven me to act thus, except one of those strange inexplicable contradictions in my nature, of which I spoke to you, and which you ridiculed, Matilda."

I remained stupefied, holding the package in my hands. Such wickedness, such insolence, mingled perhaps with a species of generosity and greatness, seemed incomprehensible to me. I then asked myself, and I now still ask myself—whether the confession which Ursula had just made to me, was calculated with demoniacal perfidy, or if it were really dictated by a tardy interest in me? Did she affect to throw herself upon my discretion, in order to increase my grief to its very acme, by informing me of the infidelity of my husband? or was it that she sincerely wished to give me, for the future, a certain warning against herself and Gontran?

I looked at my cousin with as much terror, as I felt surprise and mistrust of her.

All at once the tramp of horses was heard in the court-yard. My bedroom was on the ground-floor. Ursula ran to the window, drew aside one of the curtains, and looked into the court-yard; and then said, with a simplicity so touching, that I could not avoid being softened by it: "Matilda, my husband's carriage is now entering the yard—you can now tell him all, and avenge yourself of the harm which I have done you."

We remained silent for some moments -- my door was opened — Ursula appeared petrified, and started back.

It was not her husband who entered the room; it was his mother, Madame Secherin!

CHAPTER X.

THE CHASTISEMENT.

Madame Secherin certainly showed, under the circumstances, a superhuman strength. Until then, I had been in the habit of seeing her walk painfully—bent as she was with old age and infirmities; she now advanced into the middle of the room with a firm, deliberate, and almost spirited step. The wrinkles seemed almost to have disappeared from her brow, to make way for a kind of threatening satisfaction, or thundering triumph, which imparted majesty and terror to her countenance. One would have supposed she had been charged with a mission of divine vengeance, and that she was elevated for the moment to a degree of dignified emotion, which fitted her for the task. In her proud and lofty bearing, in her fearful smile, and in her bitter look — were to be seen the outraged feelings of a mother who idolized her son. The mother, agonized by the conduct of a guilty wife, came, in her cruel joy, to make dreadful reprisals!

At the sight of this pale woman, in her long black robes, I was so frightened, that I entirely forgot what had happened between Ursula and me. I remained silent, and, like my cousin, fascinated by the presence of her mother-in-law.

The latter cried with a choking voice, raising her eyes to Heaven:

"My God! My God! leave me not to myself! give me, if it be thy will, strength sufficient to accomplish thy purpose now! Excess of joy is excess of joy, as excess of grief is excess of grief." And, as if she had yielded to a violent emotion, Madame Secherin grasped with her wrinkled hand the arm of a chair. Then, almost transfixing Ursula with her gaze, she said:

"I told you unhappy woman! that God unmasked the wicked, and crushed them sooner or later."

Then turning towards me, she added:

"I told you, that one day you would be punished by this woman for the culpable pity which you extended toward her. I told you—I did indeed—that my son would return to me, and that he wouldreturn to ask consolation!"

And she crossed her arms, throwing back her head with an expression of frightful pride. Gontran entered, followed by Mademoiselle de Maran, and a man with whom I was unacquainted.

"May I be informed madam, what procures us the honour of your visit, and who this gentleman is? He has been conducted to my apartment by one of my servants, and I understand him to say that he appears here on your behalf," said M. de Lancry.

"This gentleman is my son's first clerk; as I could not travel alone, my son requested him to accompany me." Then addressing the man, she said:

"Firmin, we depart in an hour; you may go: shut the door."

Gontran looked at me with an air of surprise. The clerk went away. We remained—my husband, Mademoiselle de Maran, Madame Secherin, Ursula, and myself. Gontran and my aunt knew nothing of this interview until now, and they saw that some grave business was about to be transacted. Madame Secherin said to my aunt,

"You are one of the family, madam?"

Mademoiselle de Maran measured Ursula's mother-in-law with her eye, without replying; and she looked at me as if she would inquire who this woman was.

"Madame Secherin," said I; and I added, introducing my aunt to Ursula's mother-in-law, "Mademoiselle de Maran."

Madame Secherin, remembering the eulogiums that her son—completely deceived with regard to my aunt's character — had always given her, advanced toward her and said:

"You, also, are one of us, madam; you espouse the cause of the good against the wicked. My son has often told me that you are like myself, simple, candid, and an enemy to all hypocrisy. Your presence is useful here. We cannot have too many judges on an occasion where there are so many culprits."

"Although I do not wholly comprehend you, my dear madam, with reference to the judges and the culprits," said my aunt, "I certainly shall not lose so good an opportunity of declaring to you that you have the most precious son in the world; not to say that his remarks concerning me, and my ingenuous simplicity, prove that he has penetration, as well as judgment. I dare hope, in return, that what he has told us of you is as well founded. Nothing then remains for us, but to congratulate one another and our present meeting."

Madame Secherin looked attentively at Mademoiselle de Maran. Whether from a habit of observation, or sagacity, or the instinct of her maternal heart, or that my aunt's smile had betrayed her irony, Ursula's mother-in-law, after a moment of silence, replied to my aunt, shaking the first finger of her right hand as she raised her head:

"No! no! I see. You are not—you will never be one of us—your look is wicked! My son is deceived with regard to you as he is with regard to others."

Mademoiselle de Maran burst into a fit of laughter, and cried:

"My dear madam, you look like a furious sort of sibyl—a pythoness, with your old-world denunciations. Only permit me to observe, simply this: since I have enjoyed the honour of speaking to your son, these denunciations of yours are somewhat impolite; for, according to your account, I do not belong to the category of good people."

"I know not what a sibyl is, madam, but I know when I am sneered at," said Madame Secherin, loftily.

"I shall do myself the pleasure of recalling to you, my dear madam, that the sibyl of Cumæ was a sort of witch; who foretold the future with devilish grimaces, and all sorts of strange gestures."

My husband, frightened by Ursula's paleness, without discontinuing his gaze, cried, addressing Madame Secherin—

"Madam, may I ask once more what it is that procures me the honour of this visit? Madame de Lancry appears much annoyed; your daughter-in-law also seems moved. You have sent for me to appear before you instantly. What has happened? Have the goodness to explain."

"Oh! you shall know, sir, you shall know;" said Madame Secherin.

I was in torment; I felt that this woman had some overwhelming proof of Ursula's wickedness; but she was in no hurry to produce it. She seemed to *taste* her vengeance, and enjoy the horrible anguish of my cousin.

The latter, in spite of her habitual coolness and boldness, seemed terrified. She felt that all her powers would be unequal to the task of convincing her mother-in-law.

I confess that, notwithstanding my reasons for hating Ursula, I could not help pitying her, when I thought that she was going to be ruined at the moment when remorse for her fault was, perhaps, about to inspire her with a generous sentiment.

Madame Secherin slowly drew from her pocket a package, exactly like that which my cousin intended to have given me.

This observation was sufficient to show me, that both these packages must have formed a part of the letter-paper that had been sent into Ursula's apartment, and that this paper was blue. It must be evident why I insist upon such particularity in my details.

"Do you know this letter?" said Madame Secherin, with a loud voice, showing Ursula the envelope. Then she added, with austere dignity, raising the fore finger of her right hand to Heaven, "See, if the hand of God is not here; The proof of your first crime was a letter which you impudently stole from me. The proof of your second crime is also a letter; but this time you sent it to my son—the Lord having struck you with madness, as a punishment for your sins."

Ursula did not answer a word. Pale as death, she rushed toward me, seized the package which had been given me, and which I still held in my hand: she broke the seal, opened it, cast a rapid glance over it—then let it fall upon the floor, bending her head upon her bosom, under a mournful weight of conscious guilt!

Victim of a fatal mistake! the unhappy woman had misdirected the letter!

She had sent to her husband Gontran's letter, and the reply that she had made to it—she had handed me the letter intended for M. Secherin.

"I tell you that the hand of God is here!" continued Madame Secherin: "I say it is the Lord's will that you—so deceitful and so cunning, should be unmasked, ruined by your own mistake! you have put on one letter the name and address intended for another. This simple error has made it clear to my poor son what you are. He has seen, that at Rouvrai I was inspired by God, when I said—'I swear this woman is guilty; send her away, even though the proofs of her infamy should escape you.' Was I not right? I passed for a fool in exacting from my son without sufficient reasons, what seemed to him a foolish sacrifice; but God has taken care to justify me, and to prove that maternal instincts are infallible."

There, was, in fact, so strange a fatality in this revelation, that for a moment we were utterly stupefied. Mademoiselle de Maran broke the silence, and said, in a sharp voice, to Ursula's mother-in-law;

"For the love of Heaven!—all the little secrets of which you know so well—my dear madam, explain this fine confusion of letters; favour us with your moral reflections, and tell us what all this proves."

"Impious, wicked and unmannerly old age, always gives an injurious example," replied Madame Secherin, looking fixedly at Mademoiselle de Maran—and adding, with a severe tone: "Now, that I know you have brought up these two young women, I am not astonished at the perverseness of this wretch!" pointing to Ursula; "but I am astonished at the virtues of her cousin," pointing to me.

"What is this? what is this?" cried Mademoiselle de Maran. "Ah! my good lady, you are probably Heaven's female agent; but that is no reason why you should be so pitiless to this poor world. What would you say, now, if I were to reproach you, for having educated monsieur, your son, in so pleasant a fashion, that he deserves what has happened to him? Tell me this! and do you really make me responsible for the little inconveniences and mishaps of his married life?"

"Madam, if you please, let us finish this debate," said Gontran, to Madame Secherin. "It is not to be supposed that I can know what you want."

"I wish sir, to have you read to your own wife this letter which you wrote to my son's wife."

She handed me a letter.

"I wish you, sir, also to read the reply this woman sent you; for—God is just! this creature must be as much detested by him who shares her crime, as by the man she has so shamefully outraged."

She handed a letter to Gontran.

"I wish you, sir, to read to this adulteress the letter she wrote to my son."

Then Madame Secherin, who was always calm, crossed her arms, and looked at us in silence.

My husband was thunderstruck! he saw the horrors of Ursula's position, and, above all, how I must be affected by this unexpected discovery. Ursula, in a state of stupor, seemed to see and hear nothing.

This scene had assumed so grave a character, that Mademoiselle de Maran forgot, for a moment, her wicked irony, and seemed seriously attentive.

I was in a sort of feverish excitement, that gave me a ficticious strength; but I felt that I could not long endure my feelings, and that perhaps I should faint away, before the fatal mystery could be disclosed.

While Ursula was buried in her reflections, and Gontran was reading Ursula's reply to him—which the miserable woman supposed she had sent to me—I myself perused my husband's letter, which had elicited my cousin's reply.

CHAPTER XI.

M. DE LANCRY TO URSULA.

"No, no, Ursula! I cannot obey you. Your conduct is inexplicable. My feelings are such, when I look back to the unexpected happiness you conferred on me, that I must *write* to you, since I have no opportunity of enjoying *a personal interview*. It was prudence, doubtless, that induced you to avoid every opportunity of meeting me alone before your departure I hardly know whether I am asleep or awake. Do I dream? Perhaps you will assist me in unfolding the mystery.

"Who can help being happy and proud, when he has secured the love of a woman whom he warmly admires? And yet, the day after that day, when I ought to have been all cheerfulness, I was mournfully sad; and your incomprehensible conduct served only to increase my melancholy. I repeat to you, Ursula, strange thoughts pass through my mind. I am terrified by a secret and profound agitation that torments me. I have a presentiment that the greatest event of my life is about to take place. My passion for you is unchangeable—it is fatal! because it is without limit and without end. It is unchangeable and fatal, because I love you a thousand times more than you love me in return! You are the first woman who ever obtained control over me! In your presence, I feel my inferiority. You told me that you desired either a tyrant or a slave. Well, you have a slave!—a blind, contented, subdued slave!

"I am ashamed to speak to you thus; and I tell you these things, because I hope that such admissions will disarm your pitiless irony, which pursued me even amid the happiness you were pleased to confer upon me. Yes—it seemed to me that then I was yours, but that you were not mine. There was neither love, nor pleasure, nor remorse, in your looks; but there was an indescribable expression of hateful triumph, of insolent domination, and cruel sarcasm! Oh! Ursula! if I believed in a devil—if I believed that he traffics in souls—as they say he does—I would give him your look of proud disdain, when he sees an unhappy wretch fall into his power, suddenly and for ever, through the influence of an infernal charm!

"This comparison appears to you silly and absurd—you sneer at it, perhaps. Pitiless raillery! You believe that I jest! yet this comparison is serious—it is based upon truth. It explains, as far as explanation is possible, a sensation which is real and yet indefinable. Yes—from that day, my soul has not been mine own; it does not now belong to me! Angel or devil, it is yours! What will you do with it?

"This is senseless stupid language; yet it seems to me that my heart no longer beats in *my* bosom, but in yours. Hold! I am terrified to find, that, until now, I have never loved! Do not mistake this for flattery, Ursula. If I wished to flatter you, I would not employ such bitter and mournful expressions. They cannot give you a very favourable impression of me. They are tiresome and fanciful; and they inform you only of what you know, for you are perfectly conscious of your unlimited power over me.

"No, no: I tell you that, until now, I have never loved. I have ever believed, and I still believe, that the man who experiences the only true passion of life, must be conscious of feelings similar to those of women; inasmuch as they are more tender, and timid, and submissive, and confiding. Such are my feelings toward you, Ursula; and such feelings I never experienced before. A veteran in love would make no such confession. It gives you an immense advantage over me. But why should I struggle to maintain my independence? What good would it do to strive against my love? You now regard me with a different eye, since the long interview to which my wife listened. You regard me, indeed with indifference; consequently my inward conflict, whether successful or unsuccessful, can have no effect upon you. On that day, you rallied me with pitiless severity; and yet it was then that my fancy for you assumed all the characteristics of unbridled passion. Can you explain this?

"Why was I not allured by your softer accomplishments, rather than by your bold and headlong principles—the sparkling irony of your wit, and the burning eloquence with which you paint so voluptuously the rush of emotion in a woman's heart, on meeting the man she loves? Now, Ursula, this is a horrible thought! you must tell me all. Do you know why love leaves me so unhappy, so disturbed, so vexed? Why does it not give me the ascendency over you—the power which it always gives! Why—I repeat the inquiry—am I devoted to you, while you do not reciprocate my love?——Because—oh! it is misery to believe it, and misery to write it——because—it seems to me that you have not yielded to the intoxication of passion, or even to the thraldom of sense. It might be said that you have yielded, not to me, but to some mysterious influence, which estranges you from me.

"Oh! you shall never know what fearful regrets you have left me—what burning desires, what radiant and foolish hopes! The woman who inspires all that is exalted in love, has been mine without being mine! I enjoy every privilege, and yet I enjoy none! She behaves so disdainfully to me, that I cannot help regarding her treatment as bitterly humiliating. What *was* I then—nay, what *am* I in your eyes? Have I been to you a subject for sport? If you never loved me why these favours? Did you wish me to discover that I was so little in your estimation, that you could, with impunity, grant me everything one day, and forget me the next, without even considering yourself bound to blush? No, no: there never was a Roman empress, who proved more boldly by her crushing disdain, that a slave was not a man.

"Since that day I have in vain endeavoured to read in your countenance any signs of tender recollection. Does this arise from insensibility, dissimulation, or prudence? Your features betray nothing—absolutely nothing but haughty raillery or indifference. Why should you treat me thus? Am I not your lover? Nay, am I not more? Are you resolved, by an infernal and unheard-of coquetry, not even to leave me in doubt—but to make me regret all, even to madness?

"By Heaven! matters cannot continue thus! I have no faith in myself—only in my desperate love. Those intoxicating emotions, of which you speak in such burning language—ah! do you feel them toward me, Ursula? I would inspire you with all the fire of passion! Oh! how beautiful you would be, under such an inspiration. At this single hope, my blood boils, my brain swims! Ursula! Ursula! for your love, I would count no sacrifice too great—not even—I almost dare say it—not even the sacrifice of honour. And while I observe that your voluptuous and exciting charms exalt love even to frenzy, your bold and sparkling wit ravishes, and governs, and leads me captive for ever!

"If you loved—oh! if you loved, would there be in the world a mistress more enchanting? Of course, it would be madness to suppose that by the influence of love, you—who are so untractable, contemptuous, and independent could become submissive, tender, and devoted in the ordinary sense! but you might become submissive, tender, and devoted, consistently with the charms which belong only to you; and in a higher and nobler sense. I would not have you possessed of such submission, tenderness, and devotion as some women compel their lords to receive—if not with hate, at least with disdain or indifference, because these qualities are a part of their weak and contemptible nature.

"What pleasure can it afford me, that the lamb should be gentle and timid in my presence? Does it deserve any credit for that? Such is its nature. But let the panther come with soft caresses, and crouch at my feet; and then—oh! then, I am happy, and proud, and unspeakably triumphant!

"Ursula! Ursula! I feel it here: in the quick pulsations of my heart: you *will* love me as I would be loved. Oh! I shall learn how to compel you to love me. Yes, desperate love exacts a return by the strength of its devotion; it will exact it even from you! Do not mistake this for blind and ridiculous presumption. I draw this assurance from the very depth of my passion! Sometimes, I hope that even now you are not indifferent to me: I imagine that your affected coldness is intended to deceive my wife more completely, and to impress her with a blind confidence in the pretended return of my affection toward her. But no; you would have spoken some words, we would have understood one another by some secret sign: now the truth is, that since the day—at once so cruel and so charming—to which I have alluded, you have taken care to avoid permitting me the private interview I so much desired. Who knows whether I shall even be able to send you this letter?

"Strange, incomprehensible woman! if by some distant allusion, I speak of our *amour*, you reply with a sarcasm! Nay, what is still more strange, although you know that my wife doubts you, hates you; yet, since the day on which you injured her most deeply, you appear to regard her with a touching interest. Is this remorse? No: you are too proud to repent; and then, alas! remorse for what? One such fault? is it indeed a fault? and yet does it not appear that your only aim now is to make me regret my conduct, and adore Matilda?

"Observing your unaccountable coldness, I pretended to watch over Matilda with the most tender care; as much for the purpose of lulling her suspicions, as of awakening your jealousy. Instead of being alarmed or piqued at this, you have seemed perfectly satisfied and in no degree envious, This is madness. Who are you? What would you have me be? Are you my good or my evil genius? You sometimes terrify me by leading me to suppose that you exert some fatal influence over my life. No, no: pardon! I retract. Ursula, be not offended by this letter. You are one of those superior women, to whom it is safe to say anything.

"The incoherence of these thoughts, my Ursula, must show you the confusion of my poor brain: my conflicting ideas jar against one another: a thousand phantoms present themselves before my imagination. My wits and my heart are in a doubtful condition, because I cannot discover your real feelings toward me. This state of doubt is horrible. If it continue—if you do not satisfy my doubting thoughts, I shall scarcely have sufficient strength and resolution left to feign a tenderness which I ought to feign for the sake of removing Matilda's suspicions, and preventing that burst of revenge that would ruin you. Happily, the absence of mind into which I am plunged by so many conflicting thoughts, passes in my wife's eyes for amorous reveries concerning herself: a few days must elapse, and then all will be discovered. You do not know me, Ursula. You do not know the obstinacy of my nature. I did not myself understand my character before feeling that strength of resolution with which you inspired me. I shall not renounce the hope of being loved by you, even after having tried every expedient within the reach of man, and failed in all. No: never shall I admit into my mind the possibility of relinquishing this hope; a secret voice whispers that I shall ultimately succeed!

"These are my plans: do not attempt to thwart them; it is beyond your power. You leave in a few days for Paris. Under the pretext of certain calumnies which have been made known to us by Mademoiselle de Maran, I have persuaded my wife to remain at Maran for the winter. Five days after your departure, I shall rejoin you at Paris; affairs which affect my interest, will be a sufficient excuse to Matilda for my undertaking the journey. Once in Paris, I shall certainly prolong my stay; my wife's delicate situation will prevent her from rejoining me; besides, if she wished it I would not permit her: never have I felt so untractable and pitiless as I do now. I would be cruel in every thing but my love to you. My fear, lest Matilda should be prompted by jealousy to ruin you in the eyes of your husband, induces me to affect what I do not feel toward her.

"Now, Ursula, one remark more in support of what I have said to you: sincere and deep love inspires unheard-of delicacy. Until now a shadow of pain or regret has never come across my habits of gallantry. But I swear to you, I now find it a hateful task to address my wife with tender expressions which live only on the lips; they seem a sort of blasphemy against the sincerity of my passion for you. Matilda must be blind, indeed, not to perceive how much the part I play in her presence rebels against my true feelings. But there will soon be an end of this. I go to rejoin you in Paris; our relationship will permit me to see you daily without awakening your husband's suspicions. Then, Ursula, I shall make love to you with all my might, and be firmly resolved to obtain your affection in return. Exact from me all sacrifices, possible and impossible: I shall gladly submit. Sacrifices will cost me nothing compared with my gain, and I shall not regret them; every thing now, except yourself, has no existence as far as I am concerned! This is terrible to say, but it is true. My reason and resolution cannot overcome the conviction You, you, Ursula! nothing but you—always you. Oh! for my part I say, let us burst the feeble bonds that separate us; let us hide our love in some distant country. Ursula, be not held back by pity! Let my love be successful, or unsuccessful, the lot of my wife must be the same. Even were she possessed of higher qualities and perfections than she can at present boast, I feel that every sentiment of love for her has been extinguished in my heart.

"*You* are now the ideal—the dream of my soul—of my affections—of my sense—and of my life! Judge, then, whether Matilda can outweigh your influence, if you love me—or console me, if you do not.

"Once more, Ursula, you—you—unconditionally, (I do not admit a doubt on the subject—I do not *wish* to admit one, because I am unwilling to look into the bottomless abyss before me, if—but no, no!) in short, you love me. Ah! Ursula! it must be that you *have* loved me. Accident has not given you my soul *in vain!* I live only for you—only for you—*you have been destined for me!* Whatever you have said, and whatever you have done, we must henceforth and for ever be *one*. I shall not shrink from any means —you hear me—*from any means*, in order to gain you. It shall be so, because fate wills it. Adieu! angel or devil! I shall share your heaven or your hell! G."

I shall speak, by and by, of the deep and sudden reaction, which the reading of this letter produced in my mind.

While I was perusing it, Gontran read the reply which Ursula had written to him, and which she had intended to give me, at the close of my interview with her.

CHAPTER XII.

URSULA TO GONTRAN.

"I AM at least very generous—I send back your letter: it has afforded me much amusement. as a *melange* of diffidence and impertinence—of blindness and second-sight—of devotion and egotism—of tenderness and inhumanity, altogether ludicrous. It is neither great, nor charming, nor witty, (although you certainly do possess wit;) but, as all this is natural, I shall even say, that *with a horrible ingenuousness, you have persuaded me.*

"I believe, then, in your passion; yes—I believe that you are in love for the first time: I believe you would give the whole world to gain my heart. I believe you capable of the most insane exertions—of the blackest deeds, in order to attain your purpose. I believe in short, that you are truly devoted to me: but this is not to say that I am grateful, my poor cousin!

"Without pretending to the diabolical qualifications, with which, in your amazing pride, you have invested me—as if it were necessary forsooth to have recourse to the occult sciences, in order to be worthy or even capable of fascinating you—I am satisfied that I exert a strong influence over you; if you are determined that this influence shall be fatal—of course, it must be so. The result depends entirely upon yourself.

"I, also, believe that I am to blame, for having irresistibly turned your head.

"You have not, by any means, inspired me with a desire to possess virtues, if they are now wanting in me; or with a desire to show them, if I possess them. These virginal gems are buried in the depths of my heart, like pearls in the bottom of the sea. Such treasures are never obtained by those who remain on the surface of the waves by which they are tossed. They lie in the solitary and mysterious caves, which the short-sighted never penetrate.

"We are, then, perfectly agreed on several points, my dear cousin; but we invariably differ on the most important of all. You are convinced that by the strength of your love, *you can compel me to love you:* now I declare to you, as strongly as ever, that I shall not love you, and that your strength of attachment will end by making me hate you. *The love which one inspires, is usually in an inverse ratio to that which one feels.* You ought at least to know your A, B, C, Signor Don Juan.

"If passion did render you as stupid as a school-boy, you might have seen a deep truth in the passage of your letter, which was penned merely as the passing whim of your wounded vanity. '*There never was a Roman Empress, who proved more boldly, by her haughty disdain, that a slave was not a man.*

"I have *emphasized* these words; they deserve to be conspicuous. You have divined rightly this time: the sentence signifies, in other words, that *revenge is not love.* Do you comprehend the enigma? Can you now guess the motives of my strange conduct? No? Not yet? Then you are certainly not in a sagacious mood. I touch upon a theme too high for you; my only hope in making such a confession is, that it may induce you to hate me. It is, unfortunately, too late now for me to make you appear respectable; were I able to do this, I could surely extinguish your foolish passion. After I had come to Maran, and even entertained some thoughts of profiting by Matilda's invitation to occupy a part of your house at Paris, my plan was suddenly changed to that of making you fall extravagantly in love with me;—observe extravagantly in love—and to make you serve my purposes by your silly *amour.* I shall give you my reasons forthwith: I combine in my character all the qualities necessary to fascinate you. From the beginning, I did not love you. I felt myself too much your superior; and further, I supposed that the best means of fascinating you—a man surfeited with success—was to treat you contemptuously, thus hurting your pride; and to convince you that, although indifferent to *your* claims, I might be induced to yield to those of another.

"This admirable plot, so exquisitely conducted, has succeeded according to my anticipations.

"At Rouvrai, on the very morning of your arrival at my house, you made to me a declaration, as sudden as it was impertinent. I replied as was necessary for the furtherance of my design. Thereupon, you renewed your tender protestations; I replied, showing you that I was not the least wounded by Cupid's darts. In the spirit of contradiction, you fell more passionately in love than ever. All this is easily understood. For several days I augmented your love, not by reciprocating it, but by railing at it, and presenting myself to you under fascinating aspects, and effecting a sarcasm and boldness of thought, which would have disgusted any man of an elevated soul. I could hardly credit the progress I made in your heart by these miserable expedients. Had I entertained a high opinion of you, the facility of my success would have destroyed it. Remember this, the next time, Signor don Juan—that ordinarily, women of my temperament show their love in proportion to the difficulty they find in eliciting a return. They despise easy success; difficulty is congenial to them; obstacles charm them; they eagerly seek what appears impossible. In a word, profit by this advice: if you ever again meet one of my calibre, the only means of winning her is apparent indifference.

"You and I resemble one another, my cousin, too much. This prevented you from pleasing me. (I hope I am sufficiently humble, although I have ventured to compare myself to you.) Our nature is to yield to the law of *attraction by contraries.* While you continue in this *normal road,* as the learned M. Bisson has told us, you will succeed. Perhaps, the reason why Matilda adores you is, that she is as pure as you are the reverse. But when you address me, you address one—in theory at least—as fully initiated as yourself; consequently you miss your aim; you lose your advantages, and I laugh at you. The augurs could not look at themselves without laughing: the same cause makes your love afford me incredible sport. Take care! a knave who becomes a dupe, is duped a thousand times more ridiculously than an honest man. That is to say, my dear cousin, let us return to the subject of your astonishment.

"One day, suddenly, and without a motive, (at least in your eyes) you were mine, without my being yours, as you express it. From that moment, you have always found me cold, contemptuous, and as indifferent to the past as though nothing had happened. You express astonishment at this sudden indifference; you exclaim—a demon! a fatality! You ask me if I have not loved you—if I have not at least felt a lively caprice in your favour. I answer, no: you are charming, doubtless, but I have unfortunately very bad taste. 'How!' you will say; 'have you never felt for me either passion, or love, or the slightest inclination? and—you—no, no;' you continue, no, 'it is impossible!'

"You forget, my dear cousin, that there are passions of all kinds, and that love is not the most violent of them. You do not know that, to gratify her hatred and vengeance, a woman, such as I, dares do what she never would do if she were under the influence of love, or even if she felt a tender caprice. In the latter case she would obey a coquettish instinct, which would tell her that a triumph too easily obtained, extinguishes a passing fancy. But if, on the contrary, she loves passionately, oh! she never reasons. Love—true and heart-felt love, would inspire her with the most exquisite delicacy. If she yielded, she would yield to a sort of chaste and modest intoxication of her spirit. In her blind submission, she would not be conscious of her fault until it was committed: then she would feel remorse, and shame, and a bitter as well as voluptuous sentiment. In short, her feelings would be such as do honour to the noblest of our sex; for sincere love often elevates the most abandoned hearts to the level of purer ones.

"'What mystery is this? What are your feelings toward me?' you next inquire.

"Listen; Since I have been able to analyze my own impressions, and render to myself an account of good and evil, I have hated your wife! I hated her because, since we first met, not a day or an hour has elapsed, in which I have not been obliged to make sacrifices on her account; and in which she has not mortified me by her superior advantages. Never did envy or jealousy rise to such a height. In order that the blow should fall with certainty, I resolved to select carefully the point in which she was most vulnerable. I resolved to charm you away from her; not because *I* loved—no, indeed; but because *she* adored you!

"Several days after the interview, to which Matilda listened without my knowing it, I had a long conversation with her. She heaped reproaches upon me; she even threatened me. By her disdain—and now I may say, by her *just* disdain, she exasperated my most depraved feelings. You gave me an opportunity of meeting you: I hastened the moment that was to secure at once my vengeance and my power over you! for then—but no, no: you shall never know what odious designs I meditated; you would love me too much, and I am disposed to relieve myself of the burden. Now, you remember that on the evening of that day of unrivalled happiness, as you deemed it, Mademoiselle de Maran received letters from Paris, and apprised you, in my presence, of all the abominable calumnies under which Matilda's character lay. In spite of Mademoiselle de Maran's wicked exaggerations, I very quickly perceived that Matilda's reputation was horribly injured in the eyes of the world. Chance thus informed me of the welcome fact, that the woman whose happiness I had envied from my infancy, was now the most wretched of mortals.

"Until then she had lived only to virtue and to you. She had ever been worthy of all love and all respect; yet her good names was now ruined, and you had deserted her for me—for me! This was too much. Now, what inspired me with the interest and pity which suddenly suceeeded to the hatred I bore Matilda? Was this a noble and virtuous sentiment? Was it not rather the result of a conviction that your wife, having for ever been deprived of happiness, could no longer be to me an object of envy? or may it not have arisen from the thorough acquaintaince I had obtained with your character, and the certainty that Matilda's future must consequently be miserable? Yes; it was the last consideration that disarmed me. My vengeance was more than satisfied when I contemplated the future which you had prepared for your wife, your love for me being at the same time unreturned. Excuse me, my cousin; I confess that I have indeed purposely fascinated you, and yet that you have loved me in vain.

"As far as poor Matilda is concerned, I unfortunately cannot remedy what is past; but I can avoid inflicting any similar injuries for the future. I am so singular a person, that from the moment in which I began to pity her. I should have deemed it a crime to afford her any further cause for jealousy, by receiving your attentions. This is the reason of my sudden coldness; this is the reason why you should renounce the silly hope of *changing the panther into a sheep—of partaking my heaven or my hell!* Heavens! my dear cousin, I am neither a panther, nor an angel, nor a devil! I know nothing either of heaven or of hell. I am simply a poor woman who does not love you; and I perform so much the more easily my promise of restoring you to the friend of my childhood, since the sacrifice is very agreeable; insomuch, that my devotedness may almost pass for selfishness.

"You will excuse me from *bursting the bonds* that unite me to the best man in the world, in order *to go and hide our love in a distant land!* It is hardly necessary to go so far, to hide what has no existence! I, moreover, abdicate with perfect composure the entire sovereignty of your soul! a thousand thanks for the fine kingdom which you so graciously offer for my acceptance. I would prefer living as a slave in the pleasant shade of a green oasis, to reigning as a queen on a dry and barren desert. Do not, above all, forget, I conjure you, to spare me those proofs of devotedness—those unheard-of sacrifices with which you threaten me, and of which I am very unworthy. You would restrain me infinitely from weaving my meshes for my future tyrant; for I perceive that I am destined to worship some mysterious ideal, with a passion *as immutable and as fatal as that which you feel toward me!* But where has this mysterious despot of all my future being been hitherto concealed? Of this I am ignorant: but one thing is certain—your doleful aspect would scare him! Do not, I beseech you, reckon upon your intimacy with my husband, if you come to see me at Paris: you may regret the folly of pursuing me thither. In order to explain to M. Secherin my sudden departure, I shall be obliged to confess that you have been a little too attentive to me lately, and that for the sake of Matilda's peace, as well as a regard for your own, I have judged it proper to leave Maran.

"You see, then, that your cousinship will not by any means render you a welcome guest at our establishment. Stay with Matilda. You speak of a good and evil genius. If you have—I shall not say generosity, but even the instinct of self-preservation—you will return to her. It is she who shall be your good angel. If, in spite of my perfect indifference toward you, you show any obstinacy in your resolution to gain my heart, I shall be, without your wishing it, an evil spirit, haunting you everywhere. I believe that you love me passionately, but with a hopeless passion, the lover always has virtue on his side; if he had no scruple about means, he could not be without hope.

Now, for Matilda's sake, as well as for the sake of my tranquillity (understand, I pray you, this word in the following prosaic sense—freedom from the importunity of a troublesome person,) I am anxious to convince you of the absolute folly of attempting to continue our intimacy. All my fear is, that you will still have some hope. In spite of your apparent humiliation, you have a great deal of self-love, which is so much the more dangerous, as you can justify it to all except me. You do not, perhaps, believe this. One never admits exceptions injurious to his argument.

"Although I tell you that you do not please me, yet you are capable of persuading yourself that I quarrel with you in a sudden and abrupt way, in order to escape a sentiment of which I am afraid, and of which I foresee the power. Most dangerous man! Ah! my cousin! my cousin!—if you permit yourself to be caught by one of these baits which your offended pride will certainly offer to you, you will be ruined for ever! The more I assure you of my disdain and aversion, the more you would believe yourself dreadful and dreaded! According to this axiom—'let us keep at a distance only from dangerous people:' as if tiresome persons were not among the number. Take care! take care! all your advantages would not then save you from everlasting ridicule. I would be pitiless! I would take Matilda's case in hand; I would avenge her by tormenting you—I would feign pity, for the sake of avenging her! I would even pretend to be touched by a love both profound and constant; I would make you false promises, and amuse myself at your expense in the most cruel style.

"Once for all, distrust me from the moment when I shall appear to feel toward you anything else than perfect indifference. Forget me then, my cousin, for one who is a thousand times better than I am. Return to Matilda; hers is a heart of gold; hers is a soul which belongs neither to this age, nor to this world.

"Now that, by a strange contradiction, she interests me as much by her misfortune, as she mortified me by her happiness; I can say that her nature is so excellent and generous—so much disposed to credit good and discredit evil, in consequence of her own innate nobleness, that a little attention to appearances is alone necessary to render her completely happy. Incapable of believing in a falsehood, such pure souls have the ingenuous confidence of children! So little, so very little, is necessary to excite their simple and honest joy, that he must be a monster who would afflict them. You have observed this. For the last eight days you have prudently pretended to return to her affections: how her charming countenance became radiant with happiness! And then, she is a mother! Sir, above all, you have had the odious impudence to write to me, saying—*My wife's delicate situation will prevent her from rejoining me in Paris!* Hold! M. de Lancry. I am capable of very wicked actions, and therefore am very guilty; I know not what sins I may commit in time to come: but never, I swear, to reproach myself with having used language so vile as that I have just quoted. You are the most ungrateful, the most selfish—yes! the most selfish—the most unfeeling of men! for passion depraves you instead of ennobling you. This, however, is natural: a degraded passion never can elevate the heart. Beware of your vanity, which perhaps may suggest to you that Lovelace and Don Juan were no better than you; and that you may understand me as styling you—*adorable villain*! You would deceive yourself egregiously. For my own part, I am a female Don Juan, and I know what Don Juanism ought to be. I am even ashamed to see the passions I inspire, discover themselves by such vile effects. Like the sorcerer of the German Count, I am terrified by the monster I have produced, especially when it invites me, with earnest cries, to be its companion.

"Forget me then, my cousin. Once more, if you are obstinate in your foolish love, I predict to you the most unhappy end; and you will make me believe in those divine rewards and punishments of which my odious mother-in-law was continually talking.

"For one so guilty as you are, I should be a suitable punishment; yet, as an inquiry into divine vengeance is somewhat serious for one of my age, I should be infinitely obliged by your avoiding me; while it would afford me sincere pleasure to see you amend, and become the most honest and faithful of husbands, as you are already the most adored of men, Matilda being your wife.

"Adieu! adieu! and for ever adieu! Remember, above all, that there can never be any love-affairs between us without infamous treachery to the noblest of women! You have been my *accomplice*, never my *lover*."

CHAPTER XIII.

M. SECHERIN TO URSULA.

Madame Secherin, observing from our dejection that Gontran and I had perused the two letters, read a third from her son to Ursula, uttering the words as slowly, as if to make my cousin's punishment last the longer.

"I shall not speak to you of my past life. Ursula; I despise you more than I hate you. God has punished me for not having listened to the counsels of my poor mother. But she remains to me; yes, she still remains to me, and since I have her I shall harbour no regrets. On the contrary, I thank Heaven for having delivered me from a monster of perfidy and corruption such as you. I curse myself at the thought that for you, Heavens! *for you*, I have afflicted, nay almost abandoned, the best of mothers. But my tenderness shall atone for the grief I have caused her: she shall pardon me—she has pardoned me. When a woman so dangerous and abominable as you are, enters a family, it is necessary to be on the watch. I may inform you of one thing that will disturb your boasted equanimity. On the same day on which, by the will of God, I received the letter that showed the black-heartedness of your soul, I destroyed the legal instrument by which my whole fortune was secured to you after my death. You love luxury so dearly—you are now to be poor: so much the better—so much the better; it is the only kind of distress you are capable of feeling. Your dowry of sixty thousand francs is deposited in the hands of a Parisian notary. Your father will also drive you from his presence, for I have sent him a copy of your abominable letter. Finally, I may remark—and this will be the severest blow of all—that I do not suffer in the very least on account of your infamy; you hear, *I do not suffer in the least!* No, no; it is so odious, that I feel no other sentiment than horror. I find happiness, aye, great happiness, in being separated from you. My good and excellent mother will tell you so. This will be your last chastisement from me. "Secherin."

After reading this letter, Madame Secherin fixed upon Ursula one of her implacable looks. Ursula awoke from the stupor into which she had fallen at the opening of the scene; and rising with an imperious, lofty, and proud look, accompanied by a bitter and disdainful smile, she said to Madame Secherin—

"You triumph, do you not? blind and senseless woman! you rejoice, while your son's heart is mortally wounded!"

"He does not even think of you now," said Madame Secherin. "He has written to you the truth: God have pity on you!"

"But I, for my part, do not believe what is contained in this letter," replied Ursula: "a man like him cannot forget a woman like me. Know, that if I wished—listen now in your turn—if I wished it, he would be at my feet again to-morrow, begging me, with clasped hands, to return to him. But I do *not* wish it. Destiny has been crushing me from the moment when I yielded to a generous but foolish sentiment of pity toward the woman I have hated and outraged. I was endeavouring to repair the evil of which I had been the cause. Well: I shall struggle against destiny single-handed! A day will come when your son, in despair at having lost me, will curse you for not having agreed to pardon me. And that day is not very distant, madame!"

"Do you hear her? the wretch!" cried Madame Secherin, joining her hands with horror. "Regret you!—you!—see,—see—what infernal pride!"

Ursula shrugged her shoulders with an expression of pity.

"You do not know, then, what I was—what I would have been to him; for he was simple, and devoted, and good, and I amuse myself by making him happy, as I would a child. You yourself have heard him say how great was his happiness, and that I was every thing to him! You rejoice, little dreaming that he will weep; that he is now shedding perhaps tears of blood over a past which will always be to him like a vision—like the ideal of human felicity. Blinded to my faults by his love—to my conduct by his confidence, he spent a peaceful and joyous life: that life will now be a desolation. You ought to be satisfied, now that I am poor, and abandoned by all—even by my father. You are now avenged, Matilda, and you also sir," said Ursula, addressing Gontran: "you, Matilda, whose friendship I have betrayed—you, sir, at whose love I have laughed. But to your triumph there is one thing wanting. You do not see me undone—crushed under the blows of an inevitable fate. This is a pleasure which I do not mean to afford you. I have resolution; I have energy. I have found myself placed in a critical position, and my decision now shall determine the character of my entire future. One good sentiment would perhaps have led to a second, Fate has willed it otherwise. Well, I am eighteen: I have an iron character, and a spirit flexible in one sense. I can bend before the storm without being broken. I am handsome and I am brave—God have mercy on me!" said Ursula, closing with this impious sarcasm.

Madame Secherin remained silent, terrified in the presence of this bold woman.

Gontran gazed on her: and in his gaze there was anguish mingled with admiration.

Suddenly, Mademoiselle de Maran rose, and pretending to wipe her eyes, cried:

"Indeed! no! no! it shall not be said that I was insensible to the sufferings of this poor dear child; I am quite moved by her angelic resignation; she could not confess her faults with more candour, or with a greater disposition to repent. Hold! your severity grieves me; it is even disgusting. I shall take her to Paris with me, and to my house — dear little creature that she is! and that even this very day, for she cannot stay here any longer. She would infect you,—honest people that you are!"

"You dare support her!" cried Madame Secherin, indignantly—"you dare offer her an asylum!"

"And why not, if you please? Am I to be hoodwinked by your lamentations of Jeremiah, upon the desolation of abomination? Perhaps Christianity is threatened in this world with a speedy end; because, forsooth, monsieur, your son, has had a little trouble in his establishment. Is that any reason for screaming like an osprey in the presence of this poor Ursula, and condemning her without pity? For you, who pique yourself so much on your religion, this is scarcely charitable, my good lady!"

Madame Secherin raised her eyes to heaven, and said with a grave and solemn voice:

"My God! have pity upon this woman. Her grave is open, her end is near, and yet she blasphemes!" Then she added in an imposing tone, and with so much authority that Mademoiselle de Maran was for a moment astonished, "You support vice; you insult the tears of honest people; you deny God! But, patience! on the bed of death you will be agonized at the thought of the mischief you have done, and the punishment that awaits you. You are so wicked and so impious, that you shall not be able to find a priest, who will pray for your soul!"

After a moment of silence, Mademoiselle de Maran cried out, with her sharp voice:

"Ah! ah! ah! her excommunications are really droll! you are apparently familiar with the thunders of the Vatican, also, my dear lady, are you not? A moment ago you were invoking Heaven and Providence against me: proceed. Without making any reflections, I must say, that you appear to me in a light amusingly vulgar. You cannot talk a little scandal, or gossip with your friends, without introducing these lofty topics. But depend upon it, I shall have a little quarter of an hour to repent in, and a little crown to pay for a mass when the time shall come for consulting my eternal interests."

On the same evening, Mademoiselle de Maran went to Paris, taking Ursula along with her.

Madame Secherin rejoined her son.

Gontran and myself remained alone at Maran.

CHAPTER XIV.

HUSBAND AND WIFE.

Two days elapsed without my seeing M. de Lancry. The arrival and departure of Madame Secherin having induced our domestics to suppose that some grave discussion had taken place between me and my husband, they believed it their duty to be silent and reserved in their different departments. They spoke to one another only in whispers. One would have supposed that there had been a death in the house. It is impossible to picture the melancholy aspect of this great chateau, silent, sombre, and deserted as it was, while Gontran inhabited the one wing, and I the other. I wished to be alone, in order to prepare myself for the interview about to take place between my husband and myself. During these two days, a deep and complete revolution was effected within me. It was one of those moral phenomena which we find it so difficult to explain; and I confess that I do not even now fully comprehend it. It was my duty to speak to my husband with perfect freedom. This event was the most important of my life; its effects must endure to my dying day. The smallest details of this interview are still graven on my memory. It was Sunday. After hearing mass in the village church, and remaining for a long time in prayer, I returned home. The weather was gloomy and mournful: when I entered the chateau, the snow began to fall. My parlour clock struck ten. The parlour itself was small and very simple. Its two windows opened upon the park; on the right and left of the chimney, were the portraits of my father and mother; and on my writing-table a medallion miniature of Gontran With regard to this miniature I may remark, what I afterwards discovered, that it had been presented to my husband by Madame de Richeville.

To give his wife a portrait executed for the gratification of a mistress, is one of those ignominious indignities which men can permit themselves to offer, without even suspecting anything hateful or insulting in such a proceeding.

At the side of my work-table, a small rose-wood book-case contained my chosen volumes, and between the two windows stood my piano.

Passing before a glass, I looked at myself. I was horribly pale and haggard. My cheek-bones, always a little prominent, were tinged with a hectic hue brighter than usual, which bore witness of the fever that had burned within me for two days. My countenance was much excited and even animated; but my lips were blue, and my hands cold as ice. I wore an evening dress, although it was in the morning. My hair was smoothed down under a bandeau. I had not the least thought of arranging it more elaborately. I contemplated, with a kind of gloomy joy, the ravages which vexation had made upon my features; and I compared myself with Ursula, so fresh and rosy.

Half-past ten struck on the old clock of the chateau. My husband entered my apartment. He had also been cruelly changed within two days, he was extremely pale. Watching and weeping had perhaps reddened his eyes. He seemed borne down by a mental burden; his face was almost terrible to look at.

"I shall make no attempt at denial," said he quickly; "the wrongs I have committed against you are very great. You ought to detest me. Be it so; detest me."

"Hear me, I pray you, Gontran; our relative position shall be determined to-day. I am bound to tell you, with perfect freedom, the result of my meditations, and my unalterable resolution."

"I hear you."

"During these days which I have passed alone, all the events which have taken place since I first knew you, have passed through my mind in a way I cannot explain; and they prompt me to speak to you as I am about to do. I am perfectly satisfied when I contemplate them either *en masse*, or in detail. I have considered them near at hand, and viewed them from afar. In fact, the manner in which I have conducted this investigation astonishes myself. In looking back upon the past, I have remembered without any foolish pride, that my devotion to you never ceased for an instant—that it required prodigies of tenderness on my part to preserve my love intact and pure, in spite of your disdain. Some rare complaints excepted, which intolerable grief wrung from me, I have always suffered with resignation. At the least appearance of feeling on your part, I dried my tears; I came to you with a smile on my lips, and I again indulged hopes of happiness which have so often been deceived.

"That is true; but it is not generous in you, to place my faults and your virtues side by side on such an occasion as the present," said Gontran, bitterly.

"If I speak to you thus, Gontran, it is not because I would commend myself for having acted thus; on the contrary, I blame myself for it."

"How! do you regret?"

"I regret having done just what was necessary to render myself wretched, without rendering you happy; perhaps you would even have been less cruel to me, had my conduct been different."

"What do you mean to say? Explain."

"It may appear strange to you; but the result of my reflections has been, that I accuse myself, and absolve you."

"Absolve me! me?"

"Absolve you! you! I no longer degrade myself, Gontran; I have never been to you a noble companion, never shown a consciousness of dignity and firmness sufficient to make myself respected. I have been your base slave; and I have had only the negative qualities of slavery—blind submission, stupid resignation, and inert endurance. Being such, you have thought proper to treat me as you have treated me, and to show me neither mercy nor pity."

"I do not comprehend your purpose in thus acquitting me?" said Gontran distrustfully.

"I might tell you, that it is to prevent you from suffering so much, as you otherwise would, from the avowal I am about to make to you; but I should speak falsely in saying so. Though I have no wish to hurt your feelings unreasonably, I indeed care very little *now* whether you suffer or not, from what I am about to tell you."

My husband appeared struck by my expression of cold indifference.

"Your language is new to me, Matilda."

"It must be as new as the sentiment that dictates it; as new as the avowal I make to you."

"In pity, explain!"

"After casting the long glance, to which I have alluded, over the past, I made a discovery—a frightful discovery, I assure you; It is, that my sufferings—although so real and so grievous—were caused by objects scarce worthy of interest; that my continual lamentations were more fastidious than touching; and that my eternal tears necessarily and naturally rendered you impatient, exciting your anger but rarely you pity."

"Do you sneer at me, Matilda? to jest now would be cruel."

I took my husband by the hand, and, leading him to the glass, there showed him my haggard countenance, and said:

"To change me so greatly, my sufferings must have been great—must they not, Gontran? Well, judge then what I felt, when truth compelled me to admit that my griefs were scarce worthy of pity; and that when I used to say, 'To-morrow I shall recount them to an impartial judge,' you would have been right had you said to me, 'It is your own fault.' Do you suppose, that in the face of such a conviction I have the courage to jest, Gontran?"

"Have you this conviction, Matilda?"

"Yes; I have indeed. To-morrow, were the world to know one by one the tortures I have endured, people would say, shrugging their shoulders with contempt, 'The wretched, heartless creature! with her complaints and her continual groaning! she has only got what she deserves; one cannot, I suppose, be an honest woman and unfortunate without being intolerable. After all, her character is at once so feeble, contemptible, complaining, and susceptible, that it almost excuses her husband's harshness. Certes, Ursula is very perfidious, very bold, very corrupt; but it is easy to see why M. de Lancry prefers her a thousand times to Matilda. Ursula has at least a charming piquancy; the alternatives of good and evil, which keep the spirit and the heart awake, are to be found in her. Matilda, on the contrary, is a perpetual example of doleful and monotonous resignation; she has every virtue, it is true—no one dreams of denying that—but she scarcely knows how to make virtue amiable. In a word, she is a woman cursed with the greatest of all faults—she loves—yet knows not how to make herself beloved in return.' This is what the world would say, Gontran: this is what it would have a right to say, according to its view of the case. Some compassionate souls would perhaps pity me, and recommend me to adopt this course in living with you—'To love nobly—suffer—and be resigned.' Yes, these would perhaps pity me, but they would only pity me; and between pity and sympathy there is a vast gulf."

"What language! Matilda."

"Do you still believe that I jest, Gontran, when I tell you, that after all the tears which I have shed, even the wretched consolation is taken from me of believing myself worthy of interest?"

"And who has impressed you with so fatal an idea?" cried Gontran.

"Truth—cold and inflexible truth! But the heart must be widowed and deserted, ere its faithful voice can obtain audience."

"What do you say? your heart!"

"My heart is widowed and deserted, since I no longer love you, Gontran; and it is only since I have ceased to love you, that I have been able to judge your conduct and my own impartially."

"You no longer love me?" cried he.

"No! it is therefore that I can look at everything without prejudice; it is therefore that I have no *fear* of afflicting you when I make these avowals. Had any one told me, that the surpassing love with which I loved you, and which had resisted so many rude trials, would one day diminish, I should have exclaimed, 'blasphemy!' and yet it is extinguished!"

"Matilda! Matilda!"

"It was completely extinguished during the few minutes I spent in reading the letter you wrote to Ursula. I do not reproach you, Gontran; I have no longer a right to do so. In destroying such a heart as mine was—I say it without vanity—you are sufficiently punished. I neither hope nor fear that my sentiments toward you shall ever be changed. I know myself sufficiently well to see, that I ought to do nothing by halves. It would, perhaps, have been wisdom, to love you less and not to abhor you so suddenly. I know it; but I cannot mend matters now. It is impossible to struggle successfully against disappointment. I do not explain these things; I only feel them. Doubtless my tears have, for a long time, been undermining my love for you without my knowing it; and now, a violent shock has uprooted it altogether! Your letter to Ursula showed me, clearly, that all my hopes were blasted; that my love must give way, or be wasted in striving after an impossibility. This is all I can say, for it is all I know about the matter—as soon as I read this letter, a slow, but deep, and almost physical coldness, paralyzed my heart. An illustration may explain to you my feelings. I was not annihilated by an impetuous tempest, setting my contrary passions against each other—a swelling storm, tossing everything in its vortex: no, no; now at least, that the storm has passed away—although all has suffered cruelly, all has not been destroyed. What I felt, was a silent and increasing coldness, which froze and annihilated *my love.* Something came over my heart, like those *noiseless* floods that rise, and continue to rise, until everything has been swallowed up and covered by their frightful surface, presenting only to the terrified observer an immense waste, *on which no sounds are heard,* and where nothing—nothing floats!"

Being at first astonished, my husband replied, with concentrated rage—

"The very suddenness of your disenchantment shows that it is not sincere. Certainly, I have my faults—I have done you great wrong; but I do not deserve such treatment as this."

"That has happened which could not fail to happen, Gontran. I expected it: your self-love revolts at the thought that I can no longer love you, and that I do not love you even now. I was even aware that the suddenness of my disenchantment—as you term it—might mislead you. You do mislead yourself, Gontran; I am never mistaken in my own impressions."

My husband shrugged his shoulders.

"You also believed that you should always love me—you have told me so yourself— you believe now that your love is extinguished. It will be the same with regard to your resentment; it will have its time and be extinguished also," he added, with imperturbable confidence.

"Your comparison is not just, Gontran I should always have loved you, I am sure, if you had not done everything to destroy my love. I tell you with the same frankness, that now, were you to make every possible exertion to conquer my profound indifference, you could not succeed."

"But, indeed, these faults of mine arose merely from giddiness. There was only one instance of infidelity; and there is not a woman, who, after the first transport of passion arising from her wounded vanity, would not forgive one such fault."

"I do not answer by contradicting you. I do not pretend that all women think, or ought to think as I do. I am wrong, doubtless; it is the misfortune of my destiny to be always accused: or, rather, *it is a fault of my character that I am always misunderstood or misinterpreted!*"

"But once more; if it is only the letter that I wrote to your cousin that causes your estrangement from me, it is unfounded."

"I do not wish to blame you for what is past, Gontran; only, since you speak of this letter, I ask you to recall its language; and you will remember that there was not an expression in it, which could fail to give a mortal blow to the hopes of the most obstinately sanguine. You have wounded me incurably as a woman, as a wife, and as a mother! This is not all; that passion—to the name of which you have sacrificed me without hesitation, and without pity—has been, is, and will be, the only true passion of your life. You will see my prediction verified. I confess to you, without false humility, or rather, with pride, I have none of the qualifications necessary to struggle with advantage against Ursula, if, in spite of her promises, she should continue to fascinate you. I have now no compensation of affection to offer you, if she should continue to treat you with disdain. You will excuse my freedom; it no longer costs me pain to speak to you thus. I loved you so much—I was so throughly blinded with regard to certain circumstances of your life, that, unable to excuse them, I concluded by persuading myself that, had I been in your position, I should have been equally culpable. Now that my illusions are dissipated, your conduct appears to me in the true light of day; and even if I were to forget your errors—your infidelity, as you say, it would be impossible for me to love a man whom I could no longer esteem."

"Matilda! what does this mean?"

"Before my marriage—before I had yielded to the fascination of the most foolish passion, I might have known what I have since discovered, that I ought not to have married you."

"Once more, madam, what do you know which could prevent you from esteeming me? for I do not suppose that a man is dishonest, because he happens to fall irresistibly in love with a woman who is unworthy of him, even admitting what you say to be true."

After the greatest hesitation, I related to Gontran the whole scene in M. Lugarto's solitary house, and the manner in which M. de Mortagne and M. de Rochegune had compelled this man to restore the document which Gontran had forged.

My husband was terrified. During the short recital he did not utter a word. Such were the terms on which I then was with him, that I had no scruples about convincing Gontran that I was acquainted with the matter. There could no longer be such secrets and such understandings between us. I was determined openly to establish my position with regard to my husband.

If my generosity came too late, I was resolved not to appear a dupe. From the dark glances he cast upon me from time to time, as he walked in agitation across the room, I saw that, according to M. de Mortagne's anticipations, my husband would never forgive me my knowledge of that fatal action.

After having walked up and down for some minutes in great agitation, Gontran sat down in an arm chair and hid his head in his hands. I pitied him.

"I no longer love you," said I. "You have been very guilty, but I do not the less on that account bear your name. You are the father of my child; that is to say, although you have for ever lost a heart burning with the holiest love, there still remains to you, in the eyes of the world, a wife; and that wife will never fail in the duties toward you, which her position imposes. Apparently, then, our relations will in no way be changed. Were it not for the calumnies of which we are the victims, I should have demanded from you a separation on good terms: but what would Mademoiselle Maran say to that? We should only, I believe, ruin ourselves both by such conduct. It will, therefore, be best for us to live at present as we do live; afterward, we shall act according to circumstances."

"Let it be so," said Gontran suddenly. "I shall make no effort to induce you to abandon your plan. Henceforth, we shall live apart, and I shall rid you of my odious presence. You do not forget an injury: you are right."

"I assure you that now I have completely forgotten it, and that I would not avenge myself if I could. The effect continues; the causes are now indifferent to me."

After a moment of silence, Gontran cried:

"But no, no! it is impossible! so much coldness cannot have succeeded to so much devotedness; you cannot treat me with so much cruelty;—above all, *at a moment*——"

"When you have need of consolation, perhaps," said I to Gontran. "I assure you it is not jealousy that prevents me from consoling you, but a respect for human nature. I see too clearly that your love will be fatal to you, not to be alarmed. Whatever misery may accumulate upon you, you will find me ready to pity, although I cannot *love* you."

"After all," cried Gontran, rising suddenly, "I am mad to be annoyed by this affair. How do you say, madam: our position is henceforth to be that of parties entirely separate? You no longer love me—let it be so. We can live very well in one household without love. My presence is disagreeable to you; I will avoid intrusion. You shall live on your side,—I on mine. I do not in the very least oppose your plan."

"Gontran, there remains only one very delicate point for me to enter upon. I desire that two-thirds of my fortune may be so settled that our child may inherit the sum."

"Let that be my care, madam; I shall see to it."

"I believe it to be my duty to anticipate you, as you are completely ignorant of such matters. I am anxious that this should be done in the most regular manner possible, and I shall take counsel of M. de Mortagne."

"I shall never have any connection with that man, madam."

"I do not require that you should any farther than this. You will have the goodness to furnish me, at least, with proof that my intentions shall be carried into effect. If M. de Mortagne finds that the instrument is regular and sufficient, I do not ask anything further."

"All this, madam, cannot be done as you desire. Our child's fortune interests me as much as it does you. It is my province, and mine alone, to make provision for it. I shall do what seems to me necessary; and you need not attempt to exercise any control over affairs which belong exclusively to me."

"You will not even guarantee me what I ask, Gontran?"

"No, madam."

"I shall then take care to use all possible means to attain my end."

"Do so, madam; you are at liberty."

Such was the close of this interview with my husband.

CHAPTER XV.

LOVE'S DESPAIR.

Some days after that interview, M. de Lancry sent his valet-de-chambre, in whom he placed all confidence, to Paris. After this man's departure, my husband received a letter from him nearly every day. I waited for M. de Mortagne's reply with as much impatience as anxiety. This was the second time I had written to him. I did not comprehend the causes of his silence. My life continued to pass away in mournful sadness. I was sometimes astonished that indifference could so suddenly take the place of love. It was, however, quite natural. Violent and deep sentiments cannot pass into the empty modes of cold formality. They live for ever, or they are extinguished as they are lighted—suddenly—after having long sustained the most cruel attacks. Yes, these sentiments fall and die all at once, like the warrior who perceives, only as he expires, that he is covered with wounds, and that he has lost all his blood in the combat.

One other thing surprised me; and I did not know whether I ought to be proud or ashamed of it. Disaffection had frozen my heart; but the circumstances of my life had been grievous to bear. Was this courage? or was it indifference? I soon understood the secret of my conduct.

I consoled myself for not loving M. de Lancry, by thinking, that all the powers of my soul would soon be concentrated in a single being. Did my heart still deceive me? Was this merely continuing to love Gontran, by idolizing his child? I could not blame myself. Maternal love filled my whole breast. That alone gave me firmness: for when, unfortunately, I thought that the divine hope kindled within me by Heaven was but a hope—when I bethought me what a heart-bereavement mine would be if this hope were blasted—oh! then I was giddy in my despair; I turned my eyes from the dark abyss, to repose them on the radiant future, of which the prospect alone rendered life endurable.

Winter came, with its cold gloom, its sad storms, and its evenings, which the sweet intimacy of a domestic fireside shortened not to me. At breakfast and dinner I exchanged a few words with Gontran occasionally; then he would go to his apartments and I to mine!

His habits were completely changed. He no longer hunted; but in spite of the rigour of the season, he went out into the forest almost every day, on foot. He there spent much time, returning with scrupulous exactness at the post hour. Then he would go out again, and not return often until late at night. At other times he remained for two or three days shut up in his apartments. His features began to change frightfully; his cheeks became hollow; his eyes sunken; and his fitful smile, contracting his lips, produced such a dolorous expression of countenance, and such a look of mortified despondency, as I have never seen.

"At the post-hour, his anxiety was so great that he usually went for his letters instead of sending for them. I one day saw him receive a letter, and look at it for some time timidly, as though he dreaded opening it; then he read it eagerly, and tore it in pieces, trampling it under foot with rage. Twice he made preparations for his departure; but he as often delayed it. One evening I was in my parlour with Blondeau, opening a box of baby-dresses which I had ordered from England. Suddenly Gontran entered, pale, overcome, and almost mad; crying, with a heart-rending tone, "Matilda! I can no longer——" But seeing Blondeau, he stopped short and disappeared. I went after him; he was shut up in his apartment, and although I waited a long time at the door, he would not admit me.

Another day he laid aside his ordinary garments, and, dressing himself very elegantly, entered my apartment, and said, with an air almost of madness:

"How do you do? Am I very much changed? In a word, can I no longer please you? Can I not please you as much as formerly?"

I looked at him with surprise. He cried violently, stamping his foot, "I ask you if I am much changed—do you hear me?"

Terror succeeded my astonishment at this question, and the manner in which it was put. He seemed almost insane. I knew not how to reply. He went away in fury, dashing to pieces a china-cup that lay on the table.

In short, what am I not obliged to confess? Blondeau found, through our *maitre d'hotel*, that M. de Lancry sometimes ordered strong liquors to be brought to him, on which he became intoxicated. Of this I could no longer entertain a doubt. His excesses, his anger mounting to fury, and his strange peculiarities, showed me that Gontran was the prey of a violent passion, and that he sometimes sought, in the intoxicating cup, that forgetfulness which gave him an interval of repose. My pity satisfied me that love had for ever left my heart. His unhappiness grieved me; but I felt no jealousy. My chief regret was that I could do nothing for Gontran, since my consolation would produce any effect but a good one. I had, for some time, neither dared nor wished to enter upon such a subject with him, but now I watched an opportunity.

One day the courier arrived a little earlier than usual, and Gontran's letters were brought into his library, where I found him looking for a book.

He broke the seal with emotion, read, became pale, and let the letter fall, while he covered his brow with his two hands.

I approached him, very much moved.

"Gontran," said I, "you suffer much."

He started, suddenly raising his head. He wept! His whole appearance indicated the deepest grief.

"Yes, I suffer," said he, with bitterness; "what matters that to you?"

"Hear me, my husband," said I, taking his burning thin hand. "There are griefs which can now move my pity."

"Your pity! yours?"

"Yes; and for the very reason that I no longer love you, I can—I ought to console you as a friend. You suffer; I do not require to ask the cause, which has produced so great a change in your appearance."

"Well—yes," cried he, in spite of himself, "why should I feel any constraint in your presence now? Yes, I love her passionately! Yes, I love her as a child would, as a madman would! Yes, I love her as no one ever loved before! And yet her disdain is so pitiless! that is the reason why she is lost to me; and she will not even permit me to repair the misfortune I have caused her. For now my honour is concerned in her protection, and—but—hold! pardon! it is to you—to you, my wife! that I am speaking thus."

"And you may speak to me, Gontran; you do not tell me anything new. I can no longer have any doubt about the passion that consumes you—a fatal, fatal passion! which has cost me my happiness already, and which brings you nothing but disappointment."

"Oh! yes—fatal! very fatal! You know not what tears it has cost me—what hidden despair, what powerless rage, what foolish or criminal resolutions! You know not that I have sought an ignoble forgetfulness in the drunkard's bowl. Oh! this infernal woman knew well with what love she inspired me—what infamous and horrible love! to which I have already sacrificed you—even you! Hold! I am miserable, or rather—I am mad! And yet, in spite of me, this love increases every day: twice have I been on the eve of rejoining her. But I have not dared. So intractable is this woman, that a false step would ruin all. And yet, in spite of me, I entertain a glimmering of hope. But hold! pardon again! I wound you—I anger you."

"I can now hear it all—I swear to you, Gontran. For you and for me, this is a sad compensation for what we have both lost."

"Oh! I know it—I know it! I can no longer expect your love! I must renounce, it, but be not pitiless; let me pour out my heart in your presence. Now that you do not love me, this cannot hurt you. Oh! Matilda, I am so unhappy that this avowal almost avenges your wrongs. Oh! if you only knew what it is to suffer a silent and concentrated grief!"

"I do know it, Gontran."

"Twenty times have I been on the point of casting myself on my knees, of confessing all to you, and demanding at least your pity. But all my past errors appeared to come up before me: I was ashamed of myself—I did not dare. In silence I have devoured my tears. Yes, I have wept—you see I have. I am weak! I weep like a child."

He wept again; then, drying his tears, he exclaimed—"This woman has no pity! she does not remember that I have sacrificed *everything* for her—you, noble, generous creature, as noble and generous as she is perverse and infamous. But she does not dream that my blindness may have an end. What does she say? Why that her infernal pride is flattered by seeing me at her feet. She does not know, then, that as soon as the illusion is dissipated, I shall feel toward her only contempt and hatred. Oh! her vanity may yet receive a cruel blow in seeing me return to you—to you whom she always envied, as she told me."

"All return to our past condition is impossible, Gontran; you must renounce all hope of striking this blow, which you think would be so much felt by Ursula's pride."

"Well, despise me, Matilda; but I cannot conceal the fact, that since you spoke these words, which sounded so cruelly, coming from you—*I do not love you*—I have felt for the first time what I lost in losing you. Yes; and what renders my vexation more dreadful still, is the thought that I am no longer able to say—'I have always near me a noble and generous heart that forgets and pardons, and to which I always return with confidence, because its goodness is inexhaustible.'"

"Yes: my heart was once toward you what you describe: oh! indeed it was, Gontran."

"But that heart is still mine. You do yourself injustice, Matilda. A love like yours leaves in the heart unchangeable effects. It may languish for some time. but it appears again more brightly than ever. Do not drive me to despair, Matilda: aid me to conquer this abominable passion! I swear to you, I never had more respect for all that is great and elevated in your heart. Oh! what would this woman's rage be, were she to believe us happy, united, tenderly interested in one another! What a mortal blow would her pride receive! Oh! Matilda! let us be pitiless toward her; let us go to Paris and *affect* greater devotedness than ever. She would then taste the anguish she has made us endure!"

His strange proposition proved to me Gontran's hallucination, and how blind and personal passion always is. He could not then have intended to wound me, and yet he proposed that I should play an odious part, and all *to excite Ursula's jealousy!*

"At any other time," said I to my husband, "these words would have been horrible! to-day, they make me smile sadly. Alas! love rules over you so completely, that you do not perceive in your proposed return to me, a new proof of the irresistible influence Ursula exerts over you."

"Yet this is fearful!" cried he. "If this woman is never to love me—if she is to laugh at my sufferings—if her disdain is not a coquettish intrigue; why can I not renounce the hope of being one day loved by her? Why do I find a bitter pleasure in the agonies she causes me? Why, in short, do I adore her, although I know her dissimulation—know that she is perfidious and indifferent to my love?"

"My God!" cried I, joining my hands, "thy will is all powerful. Thou hast punished Gontran, by making *him* endure all that he made *me* suffer."

"What do you mean to say, Matilda?"

"You perceive, Gontran, there is something providential in all this! When I felt for you a blind and obstinate passion, I said to myself, 'If Gontran no longer loves me, why do I retain the deep-rooted hope of making him love me? Why hope to conquer his indifference, his harshness?' Like you, I asked myself these questions, Gontran; like you, I found a sort of bitter pleasure in this disappointment; like you, I met your new disdain every day with desperate boldness; like you, doubtless, I passed long nights, inquiring of my soul the cause of this mournful mystery!"

"Oh! is there anything more terrible than to be dragged along by an irresistible sentiment!" cried Gontran, so much absorbed in self that he forgot I had spoken to him. "Oh! is it not frightful," continued he, "to see reason, and inclination, and duty, and honour, powerless—by struggling to remove this fatal delusion!"

"You paint, in terrible colours, the evils which you have wreaked on me, Gontran. But for my part, in losing you—notwithstanding your disdain—I obeyed the voice of duty: mine was an extravagant but noble love. In loving this woman while she despises you, you yield to a guilty fancy: yours is nothing better than a strong criminal affection."

For an instant he was struck; but his indomitable selfishness manifested itself anew, and he cried—

"By Heaven! there is a gulf between your character and mine, You are a poor, young woman, feeble and without energy—you know nothing of life and human passion: that is not my case. After all, it shall not be said that a provincial girl of eighteen—unknown, without standing, and now without character, and abandoned by all, shall trifle with me in this way. She avoids me; she will not see me again; in short. she fears me! oh! I understand it. This insolent and haughty woman is afraid to meet her master! Vanity does not blind me; she tries to deceive herself. She is so cunning that in her letter, for the sake of removing all suspicion of my influence over her, she attributes *to my self-love* the just confidence which her conduct naturally produces in my heart. She speaks thus: 'Your pride must not suppose that I fly from you because I fear you!' There! there! I was certainly in despair too soon, She fears me! then she loves me of course! Love renders me as dull as a schoolboy. Oh! Matilda, you will be avenged!"

I interrupted my husband;

"Hear me, Gontran;—you have lately seen me unhappy. Although the cause of this unhappiness was an outrage committed against me, I have been able for a moment to bear with the pains I have felt, and forget that you have caused them. Hope now springs up again in your heart; you express it so strongly that it would be unworthy of me to say another word by way of consolation."

"Matilda, pardon me! Heavens! I am mad!"

"Since I retain my reason, then, I give you my last advice. Ursula is more cunning than you are; you are falling into the clumsy snare she has spread for you."

"A snare! What snare?"

"If she had not left you some hope, you would perhaps have forgotten her; but by making you suppose that she flies from you lest she should love you too much, she has preserved a kind of influence over you, and thus struck me a last blow without giving me room to complain, since she ceased to see you, according to her promise."

"This is attributing an odious motive to generous conduct," cried M. de Lancry.

This reproach disgusted me.

"And what, then, has this woman's generosity been? After having injured me in what I held dearest, she has said: 'I have not loved your husband, but I have made him my accomplice in an act of infamous treachery. I now repent of it, and I swear I shall never see him again!' What a sacrifice! After having done me all the mischief possible, she renounces a man whom she never loved!

"But by confessing her fault, she placed her destiny in your hands, madam! and you have seen that she did not exaggerate the inflexible severity of her husband!"

"Did she not know, sir, that I was incapable of ruining her? Had I not given her a thousand proofs of my goodness and weakness? Cease, then, to extol what you call the generosity of this woman. She injured me for the present, and she could do nothing to atone for the injuries of the past!"

Indignant at M. de Lancry's selfishness, I rose to leave the room; but he came to me with confusion, and took my hand.

"Pardon me," said he mournfully, "pardon me! I am now ashamed of my words. I feel, alas! how they wound you! It was *so* kind in you, to listen to me. Pardon me! I again beg it of you, But I am so unhappy, that I find myself without strength in the struggle. My energies are prostrated; I have no longer the power to resolve upon any course. Every day I abandon the resolution formed during the night-watches. This unhappy thought is present—always present and unvarying: I cannot escape it. Oh! this is a horrible position! What is to be done? Heavens! what is to be done?"

And this man, hardened and unprincipled though he was, wept afresh. This shameful weakness, moved rather my indignation than my pity.

"What is to be done?" said I—"what is to be done?—do you ask *me*? To see your prostration, your powerless regrets, your easy resignation to a criminal fancy, any one would suppose you were invincibly compelled to act as you do!"

"I tell you, this influence *is* irresistible, Matilda."

"I tell you, for my part, that I consider this but a base excuse. What is to be done? you say. Conduct yourself like an honest man—a man of heart! Listen Gontran. I am no longer blind with regard to you. The moment is come for speaking with blunt freedom: my future, and yours, and that of our child, must depend on the resolution you take to-day! You married without loving me; you have committed a dishonourable deed; you have rendered me the most unhappy of women; and you nourish a disgraceful passion!"

"More reproaches! Have pity upon me, in your turn, Matilda."

"If I recall this melancholy catalogue of errors, it is to establish your position and mine, and to answer your question—'What is to be done?' I proceed to tell you. To-day, from the present moment, you can begin to act so as to make your future honoured and happy. To-morrow, perhaps, it will be too late."

"Yes: watch over me, console me, come to my aid. Matilda, you can entertain only noble ideas: I will follow your advice."

"You are young, and courageous; you have wit and health. You are so fortunate, that the proof of that fatal error which might have destroyed you, is annihilated; you are so fortunate in the circumstance — the true and the false are so confounded in the world's calumnies, that honest people will hesitate to pronounce against you. Change your mode of life; become useful; act prudently; and the opinion of the world will yet be on your side."

"But how? By what means?"

"Until now, aside from your military services, your life has been useless and dissipated. Give it a serious purpose; serve your country; employ yourself. Are there no honourable paths for you to enter upon? Have you not been a soldier—a diplomatist?"

"I would neither ask, nor accept any employment from the present government."

"Be it so; you are right. This susceptibility is comprehensible. By your position—by your gratitude to a family that has heaped favours upon you and yours, and to which my parents also have always been devoted, you belong to the party that represents the rights and hopes of the royal family: well attach yourself officially to its brave defenders."

"Do you then advise me to go to Vendée?"

"I do not counsel you to take a part in the civil war. There are inducements to it which I understand, and excuse and admire, perhaps, but which I would not wish to see you share. Is there no other way of serving this party?"

"I know of none."

"Let me see—in the chamber, for example, is there no good place to be filled among the royalists?"

"In the chamber? you cannot think of such a thing! What chances are there elsewhere?"

"If you wished it you might find many. The lands we possess here, and the recollection of my family, would favour, I am sure, your election. Take hold of this hope. Henceforth let your thoughts tend to this end. Your wit is easy and brilliant? give your talents that solidity which they now lack. You would represent your country; study its laws, and its government—complete then, by serious self-instruction, the advantages that practice and a knowledge of the world have given you. There are under us farmers, tenants, and persons of every sort, on whom an election depends. Exert over them the charm which you can wield at will; inform yourself of their interests, of their wants, and make yourself their real friend. Hitherto, they have seen in you only the gentleman of leisure, indifferent to the great questions that agitate the country. Show them that you are capable of acting on a different line of principles: show them that one may be of ancient family; that he may defend the principles which he believes salutary—the rights which he believes divine; and yet espouse the pious and noble cause of the working men, who suffer and defend their country. Spend the long winter nights in useful study. Go over our estates every day; be good, just, affable, and you will make interest with the people. Allow me to carry out that project, which you once so harshly refused. By the force of kindness, and service, you will render yourself necessary; and one day you will, doubtless, be recompensed for your cares and toils by the vote of the district. Give your life this aim, Gontran; thus shall you combat and overcome the shameful passion which degrades and enervates you. To encourage you in this glorious path, you will have near you—no longer, indeed, a heart warmed with the most passionate love—but you will have, at least, a sincere friend, who will assist you in every effort and every worthy resolution; who will bless you for being good and brave; and then you will be able to say that this self-imposed task has not only rescued you from a miserable bondage, but has elevated the name which your child shall bear. Alas! Gontran, perhaps when I see you so changed, and good, and happy, and contented; this sad heart—now cold and dead toward you—may revive by one of those miracles with which Heaven sometimes rewards valiant resolutions. If, on the contrary, the blow which smote it has been mortal, then my grave friendship, the education of our child, the opinion of the world, your renown, and a worthy ambition, will occupy your life sufficiently, to make you regret less bitterly the loss of that romantic married love, of which you used to speak."

"It is not in me! there are circumstances which have destroyed this hope. Moreover, our happy days are *over*!"

"They were too happy, Gontran. One of your errors was to make me, at first, too happy, while you knew that such felicity could not continue. My error was, to trust in the continuance of this good fortune. When disputes arose, I never had the courage to defend myself resolutely. My delicacy degenerated into absurd susceptibility; I knew only how to suffer. It was necessary that my illusion should be dispelled completely, in order to bring me to myself and to reason. Perhaps, the firm and rational language which I employ in conversation to-day, might have produced noble desires in your heart and stifled your hateful plans. I might have elevated you in your own eyes and mine; but I believed what you said to me, and the deception was terrible! During the struggle between my love and your disdain, my reason was obscured and weakened; but I feel that it is now firm, and that it has been enlarged and elevated by the consciousness of new duties which nature imposes. Now I see, and judge, and speak differently."

"Differently! yes, differently indeed," said Gontran, who had listened to me with increasing surprise, which prevented him from interrupting me, "How! Matilda! How! Is it you that I hear? You? always so feeble, so resigned?"

"Answer me, Gontran: will you again speak to me with tears these words so unworthy of you, 'What is to be done to conquer the senseless passion that besets me?'"

"No, no;" cried M. de Lancry, "no! you shall be, as you always were, my good angel! Your noble and severe language has opened up to me, an entirely new prospect. Yes, yes: I will struggle—I will conquer this passion. I shall have a double aim in view—a double recompense to hope for to regain my position in your eyes and in those of the world, and to reconquer the noble heart I have lost. Oh! noblest woman among the noble, when I compare this worthy and elevated language with all the impudent charlatanry of Ursula—when I compare the pure and salutary emotion it causes me—the generous ideas it awakens in me, with the bitter feelings that her ironical and haughty spirit always left me, I cannot conceive how up to this time, I have so misunderstod and sacrificed you. Oh! Matilda! to give me courage, to strengthen me in my resolution; let me believe that this passing deadness of your heart will soon cease! This new life shared with you will be so sweet to me. It will be tender and loving as of old!"

"That, Gontran, is impossible! I repeat, Gontran, that you shall find in me all the support and affection that duty imposes; I can promise no more. Our marriage of love has passed away; our marriage of convenience succeeds: this will be a calm and mournful relationship, but full of earnestness and sincerity. I do not wish to boast, Gontran; but I wish you to reflect upon all that has passed between us, and you will confess that I have conducted myself with propriety."

"Like the most generous of women—it is true! true a thousand times! Wonted possession of prosperity renders us so exacting, that I do not feel contented even with more than I deserve."

"Courage! courage! Gontran. Life may still be dear to you. Noble ambition—serious occupation, glorious triumphs, will console. Perhaps even the day will come when you shall have no room for regrets. Perhaps I shall be the only one to know the difference between the present and the past—a difference which distresses you to-day. You may commence a new existence: courage! courage! If you find yourself unhappy, think of those who are still more miserable than yourself."

"Yes, yes—courage! Matilda! you shall see it; I will be worthy of you. From this day, as you have said, I commence a new life. You have awakened in my heart a laudable ambition; in a word, I take your advice. Besides, I cannot help reproaching myself for remaining an indifferent spectator of this revolution, and avoiding even the expression of my opinions in favour of a family to which I owe everything. This was almost baseness. Oh! thanks to you for having made me ashamed of myself!"

I confess this interview gave me some hope. I thanked God for his guidance. The more I reflected on the counsels and hopes I had extended to Gontran, the more satisfied I was with my own conduct. If ambition could take root in his soul, it would soon stifle his passion for Ursula.

Gontran—with his talents and his knowledge of mankind—once identified with certain political opinions, might certainly soon attain a creditable position among the eminent statesmen of his time.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE DEPARTURE.

The day after the conversation that had inspired me with so much hope, and during which Gontran had manifested so generous a resolution, I did not see my husband.

About two o'clock the weather was very fine, although cold. I sent to inquire whether M. de Lancry would take an airing with me in the carriage. Blondeau came to tell me that he was very much engaged, and regretted that he could not go. I supposed that the natural ardour of his character had prompted him to enter already upon the labours which were to be for him so useful a diversion. I went to ride alone.

The pale wintry sun did me good. My broken heart expanded. In spite of me, a very vague and distant hope still cheered my future. Although I no longer loved my husband—although his presence was often painful on account of the cruel recollection it suggested, I could not help thinking it possible, that in time to come I might be happier than I had expected. If M. de Lancry could succeed, by labour and resolution, in overcoming his passion for Ursula, and in substituting for it a noble ambition, then he would be saved, and saved for me! Once among men of his stamp, ambition would leave little room for tender sentiments. Perhaps, then, taking into account my resignation and devotion, Gontran would seek and obtain possession of my heart, and become once more happy. Alas! these thoughts proved to me only the weakness of our resolutions and the instability of our impressions.

As I had told my husband, I certainly did not love him; and yet, at the slightest hope of seeing him become what he had been before, it seemed as though I felt again my former love! I wished to believe in the lethargy rather than in the death of my affection. After a long drive I returned home: it was almost night.

Approaching the chateau, I was very much astonished at seeing Blondeau coming to meet me down the avenue that led to the park. She made a signal to the coachman: the carriage stopped. I was struck by the sad and unquiet expression of the good woman's face.

"Get up beside me," said I, "I will carry you back."

"I was going to ask that favour, madam."

"Heavens what is the matter?" said I to her; "you are pale—agitated. Something extraordinary has certainly happened."

"Pray, madam, do not be alarmed!"

"But what is it? You terrify me!"

"I am come beforehand, madam, because I feared that at the chateau they might apprise you too suddenly of the matter."

"But speak! what has happened?"

"Calm yourself, madam—calm yourself. This is something that will astonish you very much: but there is no cause for grief, if you are reasonable. It will perhaps be for the better: you will be more tranquil."

"More tranquil! explain."

"A letter which M. le Vicomte has sent you, madam, will doubtless explain."

"A letter? where is it?"

"Here, madam, but it is dark; you can't read it."

"But what did M. de Lancry say to you?"

"Madam, this is what has occurred. Scarcely had you gone out, when Germain, whom M. le Vicomte sent to Paris some time ago, and who wrote to his master every day, arrived at the chateau from town. He immediately demanded an interview with the vicomte. Scarcely had he been with Monsieur five minutes——"

"Well?"

"I assure you, madam," said Blondeau, hesitating, and looking at me with mournful compassion. "it is perhaps better thus. The departure——"

"A departure? M. de Lancry gone!" cried I, clasping my hands.

"And Heaven grant that he may never return!" said Blondeau impetuously, unable to restrain herself, "for you would die with grief, my poor lady!"

Without answering Blondeau, I hurried home, to read M. de Lancry's letter.

Here it is:

"Maran. 3 o'clock.

"You will guess, without trouble, the cause of my sudden departure. It is useless for me to dissemble in my present position. You see that there are fatalities which one cannot, without madness, attempt to resist.

"My presence would henceforth be insupportable to you; and yours would recall the faults which I neither can, nor wish to deny. Your virtues and my vices are of such a nature, that we cannot hope to live in this sort of negative intimacy which is barely sufficient to preserve matrimonial appearances.

"Your regrets after our marriage always translated themselves, in my mind, into reproaches, and your patient virtue always recalled my faults. I then became soured; and we shall now only ruin ourselves both by a reconciliation.

"I leave you at perfect liberty, satisfied that you will know how to manage matters suitably. I ask a like privilege from you. My resolution is irrevocably taken, and you would strive in vain to change it.

"I think that twenty-five thousand francs a year will be sufficient for you. Whether you remain at Maran, as I advise you to do, or go to Paris, this allowance shall be punctually paid.

"Give me an account of your health, from time to time; and if you have any objections to the financial arrangements I have made, write to me, and I will endeavour to arrange all to please you.

"I was deceived, as you were, by my good resolution of yesterday. This was a weakness. I had not my senses; I acted and spoke like a man destitute of energy. The current bears me away; I shut my eyes, and abandon myself to it. Whatever you may say, there are circumstances in which resolution is powerless. G. de L."

The sudden departure of my husband, and the reading of his letter, caused me so terrible a shock, that I suddenly felt an awfully excruciating pain, which froze my blood in my veins, and frightened me as I never had been frightened before. I fainted away with pain and terror. Now, as then, I say—my curse upon you, Gontran! you killed my unborn child!

Of the time I passed unconsciously, I can give no account. Blondeau did not leave me a day, nor even a night. She told me, that when I learned the frightful result of my sudden alarm, my reason fled. I shrieked with delirious laughter. This paroxysm lasted until my strength was completely exhausted. Then I fell into a sort of torpor—of inert indifference. During this period I never spoke a word, and did not seem to hear what was said to me. I remained in this condition about two months, before recovering my reason. When I came to myself, I insisted that Blondeau should tell me what had passed; all, as far back as Gontran's departure—all, up to the revolution which this departure had caused me—all, in short, up to the terrible moment in which——But my pen stops—my hand trembles: all my frame shudders again, at the remembrance of this crisis! Oh! my child! my child!

Oh! my curse upon you, Gontran!—my blackest curse! Even at this hour, my despair breaks out in groans. Oh! curse you! curse you! You have broken, without pity, the last—the only link that could bind me to life. Curse you! Gontran! you have taken away the only pretext, which one day might have permitted me to pardon your crimes against me. May you be blighted!—blighted for ever!

I several times have asked myself, whether Gontran's sudden departure, of itself, caused the fatal event which was to decide my life; or whether I ought to attribute this fatal calamity, to the violent grief which I had endured for some months before.

Long afterward I blushed at my weakness, and was unwilling to admit that the latter cause had any thing to do in producing my misfortune: it was, nevertheless, true. In spite of my husband's shameful treachery, in spite of his letter to Ursula, in spite of his avowal and my indignation—although I had at last told him I no longer loved him—shame! disgrace to me!—I loved him—I loved him still; even after the overwhelming calamity caused by his departure—the premature death of my child!

Now, that the illusion is dissipated for ever—now, that I see the truth only in the past—it is evident, that even in the midst of my agonies, which I believed the most desperate, a secret and vague hope sustained me, without my knowing it. Gontran's abandonment made me feel what his presence had been to me. In vain did I know that he loved Ursula—in vain did he avow this foolish and irresistible passion! he was still near me, at least; and, thanks to my care and tenderness, I could dream of a change for good in his heart; and, cruel and pitiless though he was, *he was still near me*, and I preferred suffering by his presence, to enduring his absence. A terrible and implacable remorse, will henceforward pursue me through my life. An unworthy love cost me the life of my child!

If, what my false lips said, had been true—if, forgetting and despising a man without faith, I had placed all my future in maternal love, I should have borne the desertion of my husband with calm dignity. It was not so. The manner in which my being was rent asunder by Gontran's departure, showed me how strongly my heart's fibres had been attached to him. But his infamous desertion, by tearing up the last living and bleeding roots of my affection, annihilated it! alas! too late! but for ever!

CHAPTER XVII.

THE WILL.

DURING my illness, the following letters from Madame de Richeville, arrived at Maran.

Blondeau, seeing that they were sealed with black, gave them to me only when I was out of danger. Fearing that their contents were fatal, she would not expose me to a degree of emotion which, perhaps, might be dangerous. The good and devoted woman's presentiments were correct.

"PARIS, 2 o'clock. January, 1831.

"I write you a few words in haste, my dear Matilda to apprise you of a very mournful event.

"I have this moment learned, that M. de Mortagne was yesterday badly wounded in a duel. They say (but I can scarcely believe it) that our unfortunate friend, with whose character and loyalty you are acquainted, was the aggressor.

"The surgeons cannot yet give any hope. The first dressing will not be taken off till evening. I fancy, although I can scarce assign a reason that M. de Mortagne's duel may only be the result of some odious conspiracy.

"I immediately went myself, to learn the truth. Seated in my carriage, I waited at the gate of the house, (in which he lives alone, as you know,) until my footman should return. Two men, tall and well dressed, but vulgar in their appearance, arrived without doubt, also for the purpose of inquiring for M. de Mortagne. Before entering, the one passed in advance of the other, and they both made some grotesque bows that perfectly amazed me. After remaining for an instant in the house, they came out and stood for a minute before the door, looking around on one side and the other. Then one of them, the tallest, (I shall never forget his base and sinister expression, his copper-coloured face, covered with thick whiskers of a fiery red, and illumined by two small eyes of a clear gray,) then the tallest of the two men said to the other, laughing fiercely:

"'I tell you, that lead under the arm is just as good as lead in the brain. However, I meant it for his head! But, although I am a dead shot forty paces, my eye winked before the look of that man: I never saw such a look. It was this that deranged my aim.' 'It matters little, however, provided the shot is *surely good!*' replied the other with strong and peculiar accent; 'in that case,' added he, 'a bargain made is a bargain kept. He has only his word, and——'

"I heard no more: the two men went away, and I cannot tell you how much this conversation disturbed me. Who are these men? What quarrel could have existed between M. de Mortagne and such beings? What do these words mean? '*A bargain made is a bargain kept!*' '*He has only his word!*' 'Provided the shot is *surely good!*' that is, of course, to say—provided it is *mortal*. How is this mystery to be explained?

"8 o'clock, P.M.

"M. de Mortagne is in the same state. They have ordered the most rigorous silence to be preserved. I begged M. de St. Pierre, who was one of his seconds, to come to my house, as I wished to tell him what I had overheard from these two men. He was as much struck as I was at the words. The red-whiskered man had been M. de Mortagne's adversary in the duel.

"These are the details which M. de St. Pierre gave me regarding the duel:

"M. de Mortagne went to his house on Friday evening, to tell him he had had an altercation with a man whom he did not know; but whom he had often met for some time past at the café de Paris, where he was in the habit of dining. This man and his companion always made a point of sitting at a table near him, when it was at all possible. Once seated where they could be overheard by M. de Mortagne, they began to speak of the Emperor in the most coarse and contemptuous terms. You know, my dear Matilda, the kind of idolatrous worship that M. de Mortagne pays Napoleon: you can conceive, then, what his feelings must have been during these conversations, which wounded him by slandering the object of his most lively sympathies.

"On Friday last, he went to dine as usual: scarcely was he seated at his table, when the two unknown individuals arrived; the same scene was renewed, and the same conversation. Our unfortunate friend had the more difficulty in restraining himself, since it appeared to him that the strangers made signs to one another, and looked at him. However, he preserved sufficient command of himself to rise and leave the house without speaking a word, as he had no substantial motive for aggression. The two neighbours were perfectly at liberty to state their opinions. provided they did not directly address him.

"After his withdrawal, M. de Mortagne went to the French comedy; the audience was small; he took a box. In a few minutes the two strangers were at his side, and began anew their conversation exactly where they had left off in the café. M. de Mortagne supposed, that there was an insult intended by this obstinate course of annoyance. He unhappily lost patience; his warmth of character carried him beyond the limits of strict propriety; and he said to the red-whiskered man, that none but a poltroon would dare speak thus of the Emperor.

"This man, instead of replying to M. de Mortagne, redoubled his attacks upon Napoleon, continuing to address his companion. Our unfortunate friend, enraged, forgot himself so far as to seize violently the stranger's arm, and inquire whether he had not heard his remark.

"The stranger cried sharply—'You have called me a poltroon: you have laid hands upon me; I have not said a word to you; you are the aggressor;

you must give me satisfaction ; This is my address : to-morrow morning my second will call upon you.' He gave his card to M. de Mortagne.

"On the card was written—*le Capitaine le Blanc*. On the very evening of the altercation, M. de Mortagne went to M. de St. Pierre's house and confessed to him that he had done wrong; but that he had not been able to abstain from defending the memory of the man he most admired in the world. He begged M. de St. Pierre to meet the Capitaine le Blanc's second on his behalf; adding that he was ready to give every satisfaction.

"Next day, at eight o'clock in the morning, Capitaine le Blanc's second, an Italian, who called himself the Chevalier Peretti, had an interview with M. de St. Pierre ; and claimed the choice of weapons for Capitaine le Blanc, who wished to fight with pistols, at twenty paces ; and demanded the privilege, as the insulted party, of firing first.

"M. de St. Pierre, wishing to make the chances equal, insisted that the combatants should fire together ; but the Capitaine's second refused consent. Unfortunately, M. de Mortagne was the aggressor, without provocation. M. de St. Pierre was therefore, compelled, he told me, to accept the conditions proposed.

"When M. de Mortagne learned the disagreeable result of this interview, he appeared thoughtful and absent. He gave M. de St. Pierre a key before he went away, requesting him to send to their address the papers which he should find in a box he pointed to—that is, should the result be fatal.

"M. de St. Pierre, knowing M. de Mortagne's courage, which had displayed itself in similar circumstances before, attributed the sort of weight which oppressed him before the combat to an ominous presentiment. Our friend regretted, several times, that he had lost command of himself so far as to insult this man, as if the Emperor's memory could not defend itself. He repeated, more than once, these words : 'It might have been pardonable —although scarcely even then—if my life had belonged to myself alone ; but, at this moment, to conduct myself as I have done, is mere folly ; indeed, almost crime.'

"At noon, M. de Mortagne and his two seconds, the Capitaine le Blanc and his two seconds, arrived in the forest of Ville d'Avray. All was regular, and according to agreement. The two opponents placed themselves at a distance of twenty paces. M. de Mortagne drew up his tall figure, and taking his pistol in his right hand, he crossed his arms upon his bosom ; casting an eye so firm and piercing upon the Capitaine le Blanc, that he was obliged to look toward the ground ; and M. de St Pierre distinctly saw his wrist tremble. However, his shot was, alas ! nearly fatal. M. de Mortagne wheeled around, and fell upon his knees, with his right hand pressed against his left side. Then he turned away, crying 'my poor child !' You see he thought of you, Matilda.

"His seconds brought him home almost expiring, in their arms. The ball had entered his breast. He was conveyed with the greatest care to Paris ; and since yesterday, fortunately, his state, although alarming, has not been such as to preclude hope.

"Such, my dear Matilda, is the recital which M. de St. Pierre has given me.

"After the fearful words which I overheard from M. de Mortagne's adversaries, had been stated to M. de St. Pierre, he thought with me, that doubtless these men had arranged their obstinate, and yet insufficient provocation, in such a way as to provoke M. de Mortagne to depart from his habitual calmness. He supposed that he had been placed by an impudent aggression at the mercy of these assassins, one of whom appeared only too confident in his skill.

"But what is the mysterious motive of this terrible vengeance ? Doubtless, these wretches are the instruments in some dreadful plot !

"This moment I have received intelligence of M. de Mortagne. He is no better ; there are, he says, matters of grave importance to be communicated to me. I shall not neglect this sad and pious duty. I leave you now soon to return again, my dear child."

"PARIS, 11 o'clock P. M.

"I went to the house of our friend, Matilda. Let us thank God, and pray to him ; there still remains some hope. He will live—oh ! he will live for the happiness of his friends and the chastisement of his enemies ! for the words I have heard have put him in the way of a horrible discovery !

"What an abyss of infamy ! But let us first speak of you. His first word was Matilda ! his first words to beg me to tell you, that pressing duties had so absorbed him, as to prevent him from consecrating to you some days, as he intended, after the scene at the lonely house! (He has confided to me, as a friend, all the details of that horrible night! you shall soon see why.)

The political crisis which led to the revolution of this past year, and the triumph of a cause which M. de Mortagne had warmly espoused, may give you an idea of the interests which occupied M. de Mortagne's attention, to the exclusion of all others, during some months.

"He has received the letter you wrote him, concerning the prodigalities of your husband. According to custom, he intended replying either by cheering you, or giving you valuable counsel; but he was obliged to attend to some consultations with his agents; and he was unable to procure till yesterday—and even then with great difficulty—a copy of the marriage-contract. Alas! my poor child! you have been the victim of a plot as perfidious as complete. You can dispose of nothing; your husband can spend all, and leave only misery to her who so generously enriched him.

"'But let Matilda take comfort,' said M. de Mortagne; 'whatever happens, whether I live or die, her future, and that of her child, will be safe, and protected from the dissipation of her husband.'

"I have told him all—unhappy child! both your just cause of jealousy, and your husband's harshness. He sees no possible means of liberating you from this tyranny. I scarce dare write these words, for I know your tender blindness; in short, according to him, the only plan is a separation! And you are not yet one year married! Unhappy child!

"Listen, my friend, reflect, habituate yourself to this thought, that it may not alarm you unnecessarily. Doubtless, loneliness is painful! but it is surely preferable to eternal vexation.

"In short, if, as I doubt not, God preserves to us M. de Mortagne, he will go himself, and, in your husband's presence, give you the advice which he begs me to give you.

"I now come to the suspicions that have occurred to him concerning the words I overheard. Do you know whom he accuses—but with the moderation of a just and loyal soul? It is the devil! who appeared resolved in his rage upon your destruction—in short, M. Lugarto! It was to make me understand the cause of that rage, that he related to me the scene in the lonely house, and the threats of vengeance that the monster uttered as he departed. He has only kept his word too well! Hired assassins, under his direction, have watched M. de Mortagne; and, executing their master's infernal instructions, have exasperated our unfortunate friend, by insulting in his presence the memory of one he venerated.

"M. de Mortagne's attack being admitted, and the choice of the mode of combat left necessarily to his adversary, he could do no more than expose his unarmed person to the assassins hired by M. Lugarto. Notwithstanding this very natural explanation of a fact otherwise inexplicable; notwithstanding his contempt for this man, M. de Mortagne was unwilling to believe him capable of such infamous and bloody conduct. With the rude frankness of his character, he admitted only realities—actual proofs—where suspicion involved a man in the imputation of a crime, even more execrable perhaps than assassination, because it was committed with impunity. Yes, he consented to——"

This letter from Madame de Richeville was interrupted. A note accompanying a large packet sealed in black, was thus composed, and written with an unsteady hand, by the same lady.

"1 o'clock in the morning.

"I have scarcely remaining strength to write these terrible words—*He is dead*! Suffocation carried him off. Nor is this all—I fear that he became deranged from terror! The frightful news had scarcely been announced to me, when some unknown person brought me a box. Emma opened it in my presence. What, think you, did it contain? A bouquet of those poisonous flowers which, during the past year, you carried to the morning assembly, and which had been sent to you from your *unknown*—by M. Lugarto, the devil in human form! The bouquet is bound with a black ribbon. Do you understand this terrible allegory? Does it not indicate at once the hand that struck the blow? and does it not threaten us with new vengeance? If so, my God! have mercy on Emma! have mercy on my poor child! Strike me, if thou wilt, but spare her! Matilda, take care! There is an infernal genius near us. Our friend is perhaps his first victim. Adieu! I have no strength to tell you a thousand tender things.

"VERNEUIL DE RICHEVILLE."

A sealed packet to my address accompanied this letter. It contained the last will of M. de Mortagne—by which he left me all his property—and the revelation of a sacred mystery which must remain buried in the depths of my heart.

I need not tell you how I regretted the departed. The only strong and friendly hand, which could save me from a threatening abyss, was now cold in death! all support failed me at once. Fate seemed to do its worst with me.

I found myself suddenly alone—with my heart empty and desolate, and my soul full of bitterness and hate.

In my impious rebellion against the destiny which God had doubtless imposed on me as a trial—weary of being a victim without any reward for my past virtuous resignation, I at last concluded to return evil for evil.

Thou wilt never pardon me, my God! May my errors fall on the head of the man who cast me upon this stormy and desperate path! No pity—none—none for him! He has plunged me from Heaven into Hell! he has torn from me my last hope!

Hate!—undying hate to HIM WHO DESTROYED MY CHILD!

END OF PART III.

PART IV.

CHAPTER I.

THE LETTER.

It is with deep distrust that I approach the narrative touching this period of my life.

While I was retracing the events which occurred in succession, between my childhood and my marriage, and thence up to my cruel abandonment by M. de Lancry when he set out to rejoin Ursula, in Paris, I could give myself up freely to all my recollections, as one by one they were awakened, and to all the impressions which came therefrom. Here I had nothing to conceal—nothing to disguise—even from my own eyes. Sincerity was easy to me.

I had but to reproach myself with the undue exaggeration of generous gratitude. I had admitted, to M. de Lancry, that I was myself aware that my past sufferings deserved no compassion, supposing, even, that the world could know them; since, in my conduct toward him, I had been utterly deficient both in energy and dignity.

I had always submitted blindly; always resigned myself like a coward to my fate. I had learned only how to weep, how to endure; and endurance is no more a virtue than tears are language.

To endure for a noble cause, is in itself great and noble. Humbly to put up with scorn and insolence from an unworthy being, is but a shameful weakness, which may indeed excite a sort of cold compassion, but may not aspire to awake lively interest.

This discovery was a painful lesson to me; for it taught me that, by so many sorrows, I had not even gained the right to be pitied. Reflection and experience taught me that, in the sight of the world, or at least of the majority of men, Ursula, with all her vices and exciting fascinations, would be likely to kindle love, while I was merely gaining a sort of faint esteem, or of half-contemptuous compassion. At least, however, I was supported by the consolatory knowledge that I had never failed in my duties; and from this sentiment I derived a kind of bitter scorn, with which I avenged myself, as it were, of the world's judgment, and the desertion of my husband.

I knew not how to explain my wonder, when on recovering from my long illness, I found myself alone, weeping, my infant dead before it had beheld the light of life.

The tragical end of M. de Mortagne, my sole protector, rendered my desolation more complete. During the winter, I bore my sorrows with cold and careless resignation; but when in spring-time, the days began to wax fair and lovely, and the first flowers to bud, the sight of these things filled me with bitterness and sorrow. The gloom of winter seemed to suit well my mood of desolation; but when all nature shone forth in the glory of its second birth—when every thing began to live and love—when I could feel the genial air perfumed with odours from the opening flowers—when I could hear the joyous carols of the birds, from the fresh green leaves—my melancholy seemed to grow upon me.

The sight of nature, so peaceable and smiling, to me was odious, it made me feel that the faculty of loving and being loved again, was dead within me. To what good end for me did the sunny days beam forth from skies of azure? To what good end for me were the starry nights, all redolent of coolness, and perfume, and mystery? Often I was, as it were, a prey to fits of despair—of impotent and senseless anger, when I bethought me, that, had my infant lived, my life would have been more fair than ever; for misty dreams had come across me of the unearthly sweetness of a mother's love. Contemptuous, and cruel, and unworthy as had been M. de Lancry's conduct toward me, it could not have sent its bitter sting to mar the heavenly bliss which I should have attained. Then I perceived the curses of our woman-life—that when we have once lost the existence of the heart, we cannot refill the void by an existence of ambitious action. It seems to be a strange injustice, that to men are opened a thousand consolations for that which is to them but a passing heart-ache—to men, whose faculties for loving are not developed to one-hundredth part of what our female passions attain daily; for it has become almost a proverb, that what is to them but the diversion of an hour, is to us the aim and business of a lifetime.

In spite of my husband's odious treachery toward me, I never fell into the sophistry of believing that one act of treason could justify another. But it was self-respect that made me feel this truth, and not regard for M. de Lancry. I felt, therefore, that, while in the world's eye I might have found some palliation—had I sought the indulgence of a guilty love—nothing on earth could be baser or more shameful than such a vengeance; while, at the same time, I believed that the very source of affection was dried up within me.

I was, sometimes, even alarmed by the emotions of hatred and malignity which at times stirred me. The memory of Ursula filled me with horror, and, at the same time kindled in my soul frantic desires of vengeance!

Again, let me instance one of the false and capricious incidents of a woman's position. A man may satiate his fury on his enemy; challenge him, slay him in the face of all men, and thus do himself a kind of fearful justice—a woman, however injured by another woman, wounded by her in the tenderest and most sacred spot, can but devour her heart in empty lamentation! *

Strange it is, once again: that we, who so deeply suffer by the wrongs of love, are not permitted to avenge ourselves boldly and openly. The world may say that our vengeance is contempt—contempt! what was my contempt to Ursula, who had drunk the cup of shame to the very dregs?

By-and-by, to these fierce resentments there succeeded a dull and calm indifference. Thus passed my life away—prayer, and the care of my poor dependants, were, though I blush to confess it, but passing consolation. The good which I did, though it employed my heart, lacked power to satisfy it. Often my poor Blondeau entreated me to change my residence, to travel; but I had neither the inclination nor the strength to do so—all that surrounded me recalled to my mind the bitterest recollections; yet still, though enervated and despairing, I remained at home. Days, weeks, and months passed thus, in lethargic torpor, both of will and thought.

I led the life of a recluse: all M. de Lancry's people had, long since, rejoined him. My household was composed of Blondeau, of two women, and an old valet-de-chambre who had been in M. de Mortagne's service.

I walked much and often, in order to weary myself out by bodily fatigue; when I returned, I sat down, mechanically, to some tapestry work. It was impossible for me to occupy myself with music, for my nerves were now so easily excited, that the sound of a piano gave me the most violent shuddering spasms, and threw me into fits of weeping.

Madame de Richeville often wrote to me. When she learned the fact that my husband had joined Ursula in Paris, she had even proposed to come for me to Maran; although it would have cost her very dear to separate herself from Emma, and to leave her at the *Sacré-Cœur*, where she was finishing her education. I thanked this excellent friend for her offer, but entreated her not to leave her daughter, and never again to speak to me of Ursula or M. de Lancry; I wished to be entirely ignorant of their conduct.

Madame de Richeville's letters were full of tenderness and affection. Respecting, because she understood, my grief, she besought me at all hazards to come to her at Paris; but at that period I had an invincible repugnance to the society of the world.

I knew, through my man of business, that M. de Lancry was ruining me. He had absolute power over me, for we were married with a community of interests, and he could therefore legally waste all my fortune.

I confess, that these business matters found me exceedingly indifferent—the income which he allowed me sufficed for all my wants. Moreover, Madame de Richeville informed me that M. de Mortagne, dying so suddenly as he did, had been unable to dispose of all his property in my favour, to the exclusion of my husband; but that he had made over to her a considerable sum intended for my support and that of my child, in case I should be completely ruined by my husband. Alas! that child was no more—thenceforth what recked I of the future?

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* It is perhaps scarcely necessary to say, that these, and all the foregoing arguments, are utterly adverse to the creed of the translator, and valuable only as indicating French opinions.

More than two years passed thus, with that monotonous rapidity which is ever the result of uniform and regular habits. After a time, I ceased indeed to suffer; but it was because I felt nothing—neither joy nor sorrow.

Perhaps I should have remained yet longer in that state of apathy—in that lethargic sleep of all the faculties, had not the following letter from Madame de Richeville, aroused me to the absolute necessity of returning to Paris.

"Paris, Oct. 20th, 1834.

"I am compelled, my dear Matilda, in spite of your orders to the contrary, to write to you about M. de Lancry. Yesterday one of my friends, by the greatest chance, learned that your husband is engaged in negociating the sale of Maran. The person who wished to purchase it, stated his offer, I believe, to be twenty or thirty thousand francs. I know how much you are attached to that property, because it belonged to your mother; and perhaps, also, because it was there that you so deeply suffered. I thought, therefore, that I should do well—after consulting M. de Rochegune, who has returned hither within the month—to send my man of business to M. de Lancry, who does not know him, to offer him a larger sum than he had been offered previously. Your husband has accepted it; the deed of sale is prepared, but your presence in Paris is indispensable. Your contract of marriage was so drawn up, that you can hold no property in your own name. Many formalities are therefore necessary, to insure to you the possession of this estate—even under a feigned name—so that your husband may not have the power to squander it in his prodigality. If the arrangements we have made should meet your wishes, you can so invest, very favourably, the sum which M. de Mortagne deposited in my hands on that ever fatal night, when——

"Pardon me these tedious details of business, my dear child; but you understand—do you not? how important all this is for you. And I am happy at the chance which has given me the means of saving you from new regrets and sorrows.

"A journey to Paris is, therefore, absolutely necessary. It will, perhaps, tend to arouse you from the sad melancholy which you suffer. Poor child! your letters make me almost despair—can it be that your grief is indeed incurable? must we abandon you to this fatal and inactive state of sorrow?—Why bury yourself so obstinately in your dark thoughts?

"Better than any one can I comprehend your retirement from the world—but is there no medium between utter solitude and the whirl of gay society? I dare not speak to you of my happiness, or cite my life as an example to defend the taste which I would awaken in you, for a life rendered pleasant by a few intimate associates. My Emma is with me—and you would reply, with justice, that therefore I cannot be otherwise than happy.

"It seems to me, however, that the exclusion in which you live, cannot but exacerbate your noble spirit, if anything could make it lose its angelic qualities. Therefore I say, again, come—come and join us.

"Since the education of Emma has been completed, and I have left the *Sacré Cœur*, I have formed the most charming intimacy with women a little older than myself; for I have now submitted myself very quietly to the lot of an old woman; which has disarmed many of those who might have otherwise supposed me still ambitious. I stay at home every night, and I am obliged to be inflexible, indeed, to prevent my little drawing-room from being completely overrun. You are often talked of among us; for the conduct of your husband is so openly scandalous, and such is the effrontery of *that horrible woman*, while your resignation is so noble, so courageous, that there is but one voice concerning you—a voice of pity and of admiration.

"The revolution has so completely overthrown and broken up society, if I may so speak, into little circles, that no great house is open! This is less from hostility to the government, about which there is very little stir, than from the impossibility of reuniting a society from these scattered fractions.

"After the restoration, the *court*, its duties, its connections, its ambition, its intrigues—all tended to render our world unanimous. Now, there is no connecting link; every one lives, apparently, according to his own tastes, his own fancies; and of this, in place of large assemblies, little coteries are the result. The Sardinian and Austrian ambassadors are the only centres to which the dissevered fragments of our old society are attracted.

"Do not be surprised, my dearest child, that I expatiate on these trifles, so childish in appearance, as connected with the grave determination which I am urging you to take.

"If the world now, were what it was four years ago; if there were still a court, I should comprehend your reluctance to enter it again. Women of your character blush for those who have outraged them; so that the shameless conduct of M. de Lancry would impose on you the necessity of solitude; for, as you wrote to me yourself, 'A woman either suffers from the desertion of her husband, or she suffers not. In either of these alternatives, it is as unbecoming to her to display her indifference, as her grief.' But once more, my dear child, I do not ask you to go out into the world; my usual society, in which there is so much anxiety to see you, is composed, at the most, of fifteen or twenty persons, and nearly all them are my relations or connections.

"I will now introduce you to some of the number, which shall be my last argument in favour of your coming to us. You will meet, nearly every evening, the excellent Prince d'Hericourt and his wife. Both these most admirable persons have won, by dint of magnanimity and worth, the world's pardon, for a life of affection and tenderness, which never has been overshadowed by the slightest storm-cloud. The first revolution ruined them; the last stripped them of their hereditary dignities, and of the offices which constituted all their fortune. Having again become poor, they have encountered their misfortunes with so much constancy and courage, that they are now as much respected in calamity as they were formerly in the midst of wealth and prosperity.

"I assure you, Matilda, that the sight of these two old persons, so serenely tranquil as they are, would calm your sense of anguish, and give you courage to support your griefs more firmly.

"Two days ago, I went to visit the princess in the morning. She and her husband occupy a small house near the *barriere des Monceaux;* induced to select that quarter for their residence, by the quiet solitude, by the enjoyment of a pretty garden; and, above all, by the moderation of the price. I can hardly explain to you the feelings of veneration with which I entered that modest dwelling.

"Nothing can be more simple than the arrangement and furniture of the small rooms; but a few old and magnificent family portraits—a few royal presents made to the prince while ambassador extraordinary at various courts, gave to the humble habitation a character of greatness, nobly and undeservedly fallen, which brought tears to my eyes.

"I thought bitterly that the prince and princess, accustomed to a life of splendour, are, perhaps, in their old age, undergoing real sufferings; and yet no complaint is ever heard from their lips—no bitter exclamation against their evil fortune.

"I could not hinder myself from letting the princess discover something of my admiration. But with a simplicity in itself almost sublime, she answered me, 'My dear Amelia, the secret of what you call our courageous resignation, is extremely simple. We think of those who are yet more unfortunate than we are—we think of how my husband and myself might have been separated in our times of trial—and, above all, we think of our poor old king and his children, and we thank God that he has spared us the sufferings which might have been laid upon us.'

"Matilda, I know how much sympathy and interest your sufferings call forth—I will not tell you to compare your hideous griefs to theirs, or to imitate their stoical resignation: but I will say to you once more—'Come, come to us!' It is, indeed, almost a consolation to have such persons to love. Think of this, my poor child, and consider, when, after days of melancholy solitude, you seek in vain for the forgetfulness of sleep, what consolation you can find? none, surely. If, on the contrary, you had before your eyes a scene as affecting as that which I have been labouring to describe, should you not be led to think yourself less wretched? Why should it not be with the maladies of the mind, as it is with those of the body? If a pure and salubrious air can re-establish the health of our physical natures, why should not the sickness of the soul be alleviated by an atmosphere of generous and elevated sentiments?

"I know that you are kind and charitable; but in proportion as you are modest, so do you lay less weight on your good deeds, until charity has become to you no longer an alleviation of your chagrin.

"Once more, come to us; we will soon win you from your griefs; for you will find with me, my cousin, that amiable and witty Countess, A. de Semur; quick, brilliant, versatile, and, above all, pitiless to everything base or treacherous. She delights in paradox—can you guess why? She loves it for the power it gives her of exalting everything generous in the opinion of all persons; but yet more for the opportunity it furnishes of sacrificing, without pity, everything that she can find mean, or ridiculous, or absurb.

"Do you remember, at your first entrance into the world, to have seen, at the ball of Madame, the Austrian ambassadress, a foreigner, Lady Flora Fitzallan? She has, at all events, not forgotten you. I see her very often, and she is constantly talking of you. On that day, she was admiring the expression of ingenuous wonder which was imprinted on your lovely features, when she was told that you had the most severe and caustic wit, and the most malicious character that can be imagined. You have since explained to me that this was one of Mademoiselle de Maran's first calumnies. Lady Flora was struck dumb with surprise—almost, indeed with fear, as she has since told me—at learning that a face so candid and so *naïve* in its outward seeming, should be the mask of so much malice. You may be sure that I very quickly undeceived her. She thanked me most eagerly for doing so. It would have been grievous to her to believe that beauty and simplicity should be so utterly deceitful. You will be charmed with Lady Flora; and as for Lord Fitzallan, he is a finished model of an English Lord—sincerity and truth combined with dignity of bearing

"You must have met, at various times, the Marchioness of Serigny, and her daughter, the Duchess of Grandval. If you have not—in order to be acquainted with them, picture to yourself the most perfect grace, joined to the most distinguished manners, and to a sort of native elegance. For in that family, beauty, and dignity, and good taste, are the hereditary appanage of the female line. These constitute the privileges of their Salic law.

"Among the men, you will often see at my house, M. the ambassador of ***, one of my oldest, and most valued friends—a man of great heart, rare courage, admirable common sense, and high reasoning powers—a man who has distinguished himself in arms, and who is upright and good, because he is brave and energetic. I beg you to understand that I do, at times, see others than grave and serious persons. You know how fond I am of contrasts, so that I can promise to show you sometimes, the *pea-blossom* of the day—one of my nephews, Gaston de Senneville. It is impossible for any one to be better looking, better tempered, more perfectly well brought up, and at the same time more *inoffensive*, not to say insignificant. He is one of those *nice young men*, who march at the head of the adorers of all fashionable women, like the Coryphæus of the antique tragic chorus; so that I, who am no longer a woman of fashion, was astonished to find him coming so often to my house. He has confessed to me, however, that in the first place, he likes me better than any kinswoman he has in the world; and secondly, that the customs of my house lead him to acquire a consistency of character, and a habit of serious reflection, which his age would not permit him to find elsewhere, and which he deems a great advantage to him. He has, besides, the good taste to be in no wise exclusive, and to display his neat person and excellent manners in all societies. It follows of course, without saying it, that he goes to what is called the *New Court*, and it is he who keeps up the current news of that society, in which they say some of the women—though strangely enough brought up—are very charming, and the men generally indescribable. This sort of harmless gossip amuses us exceedingly; and, moreover, it is always well that in every family there should be some one member, devoted to the powers that be: one can never tell what may happen next, and it is never amiss to be attached, by some tie or other, to the government of the day.

"But look you, I am beginning to grow wearisome in my details; and I will speak but two words of one of our best friends, who is the very soul of our little society. I told you, *en passant*, that M. de Rochegune had returned, but without entering into particulars. I will now repair the omission. In the first place, I should have scarce known him, so much is he burned by the suns of the Levant. After having fought as long as the war lasted, for the Greeks against the Turks, he went, from curiosity, to fight with the Circassians under the Russian flag—from curiosity alone. It is impossible to relate anything more charmingly than he does the strange and wild details of those campaigns. He has gained all that, in my opinion, he wanted previously—that is to say, a self-confidence, a firmness of manner, and a readiness of speech, which relieve the dignity of a character, which I always thought too noble to be so timid and reserved. This newly acquired brilliancy was, as you can readily imagine, sadly depressed by the lamentable death of M. de Mortagne. We often talk of that inestimable lost friend; but now that he is gone, we have in M. de Rochegune a sincere and steady friend. He is in truth a man of extraordinary moral courage—no consideration checks his bold frankness; he dares to say and do what no other person dares. The Countess A. de Semur says of him very justly— *that it is impossible for any one to be more independently honourable!* He frequently speaks in the Chamber of Peers, where his cutting and plain-spoken words spare neither friends nor foes, when in the discussion of great principles, which are above both men and measures. Although so young, great account is made of him already, for his influence is nearly as great as his independence.

"Now then, my dear Matilda, my task is nearly fulfilled. I have essayed to depict to you the persons, in the midst of whom you shall live, if you will; and who wait, not to love you, but to tell you, that they have loved you long already. Believe me, in the same proportion as the world at large is slanderous and malignant, so are there limited and chosen groups of intimates, kind and devoted towards those who compose them.

"My dear child, I have already told you that I have sinned—I confess it—but the world did not stop with reproving what errors I had committed, but went on to invent the most hideous calumnies about me. My name—my family—my connections—my fortune and my character, barely sufficed to prevail against the general outcry raised against me. Now, ever since I have retired from the noisy world—ever since years, misfortunes, reason and religion have contributed to give me that solidity of principles, that regularity of habits, which I did not possess before, I have found nothing but indulgence, sympathy, and interest, in all those around me.

"I need not, I fancy, tell you, after I have named the persons who form my habitual circle, that they compose the very *élite* of the best society; and that their earnest and attentive kindness absolves me, as it were, from the consequences of past faults. The Prince and Princess d'Hericourt, above all others, are persons, whose whole life has been marked by so bright a purity—the authority of whose approbation is so weighty, that on their praises or reproof depends much of the consideration we meet in the world. In one word, the Prince d'Hericourt represents everything that is most honourable, delicate, elevated and courageous. Although he now lives somewhat retired, to the honour of society be it spoken, he has, perhaps, even greater influence over it, than he possessed before the calamities which have afflicted him, and which he bore so nobly. You will judge, hence, how happy I must be; and how proud, likewise, of the good opinion of this venerable couple.

"And to conclude, I must tell you what fills my whole heart with gratitude and joy; Emma is loved by all as she deserves to be loved. It may well be that the secrets of her birth is known, although she passes for an orphan, of whom I have taken charge. But the delicate reserve which is kept up on this topic, is the surest proof of the forgiving toleration which I meet on all sides. You remember—do you not—how beautiful my Emma was? Well, if a mother's partiality does not deceive me, she has become yet fairer. And then, the education which she received under my eyes at the *Sacré Cœur*, has developed, has ripened all the excellent natural qualities with which she was endowed. Two or three times a week, I have her with me—all my friends are enchanted; but, in a word, you shall see her!

"You shall see her, do I say? Alas! Matilda, will you see her?—will you renounce the solitary and disconsolate life in which you have consumed so many of your brightest years? It might be imagined that your sad seclusion was adopted as an expiation—but, good Heaven! of what?—an expiation of the wrongs which you suffered at the hands of others? But I am almost reassured; the causes why you should now return to Paris are so serious, that it would be actual madness in you to hesitate. For the very reason that you cling to Maran, you must at least provide for yourself the means of possessing it.

"I scarcely dare to hope that the last consideration, which I am about to name to you, may prove an inducement to determine you. Nevertheless, I will try. You know that I now live in a house on the *rue De Lille.* At the end of the garden of this house, there stands a delightful detached building, formerly occupied by the dowager Marchioness de Montal. She has left it—it is in perfect order—will you take it? I do not think that your establishment will be larger than her's was; at all events, a portion of my offices is entirely useless to me: I put it readily at your disposal. The garden is very large, and when you choose, you will be completly secluded in your pavilion. If you wish to see nobody, you shall see nobody. But I, at least, and Emma, will be near you; and believe me, my dear child, it is always a source of consolation to know that we have near us fond and devoted hearts.

"Matilda—reflect well on what I have proposed to you. I can imagine your reluctance to come to Paris—to live here alone. At your age, in your position, that would be impossible; on the other hand, you cannot think of living with your aunt, for your base cousin lives in her house. My plan, while perfectly becoming and proper, will leave you at the same time in perfect liberty.

"I have become altogether an old woman. You know that, whenever I have chosen, I have always made people depend on me. I can therefore be a very useful chaperone to you, thanks to this half-community of honours. One word more, Matilda; I would never have asked you to come and join me, if I had not so established and strengthened my new position in the world, that I can offer you both aid and protection. If the choice, the guaranties, and above all, the authority of my relations, did not now shelter me completely from all calumny, I would not have taken it upon me to act, almost, a mother's part toward you. You comprehend me, do you not, my sweet child? This confession should not astonish you—I have made others yet more humiliating to my vanity.

"Believe me, then, when I tell you that if you come to me, you can do so in all security and confidence. Emma has this moment come in—she begs me to recall her to your recollection, and to tell you that she thinks of you very often; and, without knowing you very well, *loves you as much as you love me*. These are her own words—they are so sweet to my heart, that I should hesitate to repeat them, while I say to you—Come, come; you are loved as tenderly, as you are expected eagerly.

"A thousand most affectionate loves—

"VERNEU DE RICHEVILLE."

CHAPTER II.

ROUVRAI.

WHEN I had read this letter, its effect on me was decisive. Except that which related to matters of business, and to the purchase of Maran, Madame de Richeville did little more than take up again the thread of a correspondence which we had maintained during the last two years. But the tears came into my eyes as I read the last passage of her letter, wherein she dwelt upon the sort of reestablishment which she owed to her change of conduct, in order to convince me that she was worthy now to play the almost motherly part which she proposed to me. Even, if my journey to Paris had not been a thing of the last necessity, I believe I should have accepted Madame de Richeville's offer; had it only been to avoid hurting her feelings by a refusal, which she might have easily misconstrued.

I will confess, moreover, that the interesting picture which she drew of the intimacy in which she lived with persons whom I had always heard celebrated for their character and talents, had some effect on the formation of my resolution.

When I was on the point of entering upon a new course of life, I certainly experienced some regret, at leaving the places where I had undergone so much; for, of late, I had found a sort of pleasant, careless indifference growing over me, like a salutary sleep, in the tranquillity which had succeeded to my violent excitements. How could I tell, what might befall me in the future?

The fear of meeting Ursula or M. de Lancry at Paris, had nothing to do with my determination of living in seclusion. It is true, indeed, that I felt the deepest scorn for M. de Lancry, the most bitter abhorrence for Ursula; but I had still sufficient confidence in my dignity, to be sure that, were I to meet them face to face, my brow would not turn pale, in spite of all their audacity.

From the moment when my husband had deserted me, I looked upon myself as separated from him for ever—in fact at least, if not by legal right. And it was this position, very embarrassing at best for a young woman, joined to my reluctance to live alone in Paris, that had contributed to prolong my resi-

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dence at Maran. Now, therefore, Madame de Richeville's offer that I should dwell with her, removed all my scruples.

I gave Blondeau notice, that I was about to quit Maran, in order to go to Paris and live with the duchess; and she, while she packed up all things in haste, lest I should change my resolution, shed tears of grateful joy.

It was the end of autumn, when I left Maran. Though it was necessary for me to pass through Rouvrai, I hardly knew whether I should stop, or not, to visit Madam Secherin; of whom, or of her son, I had received no tidings since that fatal day on which she had arrived at Maran, to inform Ursula that her husband, indignant at her shameful conduct, separated himself from her for ever!

I much dreaded this visit—I felt as if it might open anew, both in my bosom and that of those unhappy persons, the scars of wounds partially healed already. But, on the other hand, I could not endure to be thought indifferent to the sorrows of a man so good and upright. While I was hesitating yet, I found that I was almost within sight of M. Secherin's manufactory. I called to the postillion to drive at a foot's-pace, wishing to take counsel with myself for a few minutes; when suddenly I saw M. Secherin issue from a hollow way, which insected the high road.

He perceived me, stopped short, looked at me for a few minutes with a wild and haggard expression, and then, hiding his face in his hands, returned abruptly into the road from which he had just before come forth. M. Secherin was lamentably altered. He had recognized me, and I could no longer avoid paying a visit to his mother. I ordered them to drive up to the house. Blondeau waited for my return, in the carriage, at the end of the avenue of lindens in which I had met Ursula at my last visit.

I went on alone, keenly struck by the air of desolate neglect which reigned through the garden, kept of old with so much care and adornment. Weeds and parasitic plants had almost blocked up the alleys; the old trees—formerly trimmed so symmetrically—being no longer pruned, shut out the view of the broad Loire and the smiling landscape. No trace of flowers could be discerned in the deserted parterres—the dead leaves rustled mournfully beneath my feet—the gray and rainy sky of an autumnal morning, added a duller gloom to a scene which required no such heightening.

At the end of the valley of yoke-elms, in which I had overheard Gontran's first declaration to my cousin, I saw the group of figures of painted stone, half-overthrown and broken. In the vestibule I found one of the servant girls, whom I remembered to have seen before at Rouvrai, and she informed me that Madame Secherin was in the drawing-room. I passed through the ante-chamber and the dining-parlour—they were as cold as ice, and the tiled floors, once so neatly waxed and reddened, were stained with green mould, and soiled with humidity. Everything seemed worn out, and ruined. How sad a change in the habits of the good old lady, whom I had ever seen so vigorous in the performance of her domestic duties—so jealous of the most precise cleanliness of her dwelling!

The doors were open; and with my light and noiseless steps, I reached the drawing-room in which Madame Secherin was sitting, without awakening her attention. She was still seated at her spinning-wheel, and wore, as of old, her black dress, and mob-cap of white linen. Her old gray parrot, half-torpid with the cold, was slumbering on his perch. A few withered twigs of vine, stripped of their leaves, and swaying to and fro to every breath of air, might be seen through the latticed windows, which were all dimmed with foggy moisture, hanging from a neglected trellice. Two blackened logs burnt sullenly among the gray ashes on the hearth—the window curtains, and the draperies of the furniture, once white as snow, were now all yellow from the wood-smoke. In one word, all the house, which, by its splendid cleanliness, had once almost encroached upon the bounds of luxury, now showed the melancholy, sordid carelessness of age, which seemed to say—"to what end so much care, for so brief an existence?"

As I recalled to my mind the gaiety, the animation, which the presence of a young and lovely woman had for a time shed over this sad dwelling, a thought struck me, at which I shuddered. If M. Secherin still cherished memories of Ursula: if, in despite the irreparable wrongs she had heaped upon him, he still compared the present with the past! how truly wretched must be the tenor of his life!

My heart throbbed in my breast so painfully, that I paused at the door of the drawing-room. As I examined more attentively the pale and austere face of Madame Secherin, I was astonished at the multiplicity of wrinkles which grief had ploughed in her features. Twice the measured movement of her wheel grew slower, like the pendulum of a clock gradually running down; her head sunk down upon her breast, her fixed and blood-shot eyes gazed forward, seeing nothing—one of those tears, so unusual to the aged, moistened her red and burning lids—then making a quick, sudden movement, as if she had awakened with a start, she set her wheel again in motion, with a sort of feverish rapidity. Not wishing to remain any longer thus unseen, I moved the key lightly in the lock. Madame Secherin raised her head, saw me, and pushing her wheel back to a distance with her foot, stretched out her two arms to me, without uttering a word. I kissed her venerable hands, and seated myself close beside her. After a silence of some minutes, she exclaimed, suddenly:

"Ah! I am very wretched! The most wretched of creatures! But tell it not to my son! He knows nothing of it!"

"I have just met him," answered I; "he appears to me to be sadly changed."

"The poor boy can scarcely be recognized for himself. Grief is destroying him! He still thinks of that base woman!" she added, with an air almost of fierceness; and then continued, "and yet she never did him but evil—while I! I!—Good God! I have loved him ever, as the son of my agony! Yes; and notwithstanding this, he still thinks of her—still thinks of her more affectionately, even then he does of me!"

"I hope you are mistaken," I replied to her; "undoubtedly, my cousin is more absorbed by the grief of having been so unworthily deceived, than by the recollection of——"

"Mention not her detested name!" she cried, interrupting me with violence; "mention it not—for pity's sake! You wish to console me? But I do not abuse myself—no! no! It is not indignation that my son experiences! Indignation storms! lightens! seeks those with whom to curse the guilty cause! Moreover, after indignation, comes scorn! and, later still, forgetfulness! Yet, this unhappy boy forgets not! No! he forgets not anything!"

"Wait: wait yet awhile. I doubt not that my cousin has reached the point of scorn already—forgetfulness will follow soon. Believe me; if he is deeply grieved—it is because, to a noble heart, it is painful to despise!"

Madame Secherin shook her head sadly, and said to me, "Alas! you are, too, mistaken. Would to God that he could despise her! But I have guessed the truth!"

"What do you say?"

"The truth! I have guessed it! He is ashamed of it, likewise—and shuns me—keeps himself in seclusion. During the first part of his sorrow, I could well understand that he would be alone. I said to myself, that from tenderness to me, he could not bear that I should see what he suffered—for, indeed, you cannot conceive what grief he has undergone!"

"He has suffered, then, very terribly?"

"Indeed, he has! I have seen him whole days—whole days!—do you understand me? and whole nights! tossing upon his bed—weeping fierce, fiery tears—and interrupting his sobs, only to burst into fits of frantic rage; to utter shrieks and groans of agony and despair, which he could still only by biting the sheets in his fury. I think I can see him, even now, oh God of Heaven! clinching his hands, tossing his arms about; not recognizing my voice even, but in his delirium calling fiercely on that woman! calling her!—wretch that she was! when he had no eyes for me, who was there—praying—weeping beside his pillow. Heavens! how many nights have I passed so, kneeling beside his bed; bathed in his tears and in my own; terrified, lest at any moment he might lose his reason in those fits of fury! With what anguish did I await that he should recognize me. Then," said the wretched mother, raising her handkerchief to her eyes, "then—for he is good and affectionate as a young child—when he came back to his senses, he would embrace me; would beseech my pardon for afflicting me; for being unable to control his anguish. Therefore, at first, I despaired not. If sometimes he replied to me shortly or hastily, when I wished to encourage him, I said to myself, 'by-and-by, he will recover.' I did my best in the endeavour to console him, to calm him, to amuse him; but I could not succeed. I sought in the town for the most interesting books; despite the weakness of my eyes, I tried to read to him. He did not listen to them. I prepared for him the dishes which he used to love—he would not eat them. I strove to bring his friends hither, he received them so coldly, that they had not the courage to return. Notwithstanding my years, I offered to travel with him. He refused. Although this house is consecrated in my eyes, and though I wish to die here, as my husband died—fearing that these recollections might recall to his mind too many grievous reflections, I have proposed to him to dwell elsewhere. All availed nothing! He refused; still refuses, as he refuses everything that his mother has to offer him!"

There was such a pathos in those plain and simple lamentations, and I perceived that the life of Madame Secherin must be so very grievous, when I considered the insurmountable regrets of her son, that I could but press her hands sadly in my own, and fix on her a look of deep sorrow.

"I have always been patient with him," she continued. "I said to myself, 'his grief for that odious woman cannot last for ever.' I prayed the ever-merciful Lord, to touch my son with grace, and restore him to me. I offered masses to his guardian saint. Alas! all was in vain! The more I strove to do, the more was I convinced that I was nothing—that I could be nothing to my son!" and her voice, as she spoke, was broken with sobs; "yet I have never dared to tell him so. He was already so unhappy, that I still waited. Sometimes, in order to please me, he has affected a less sad expression. Once, the poor fellow smiled on me; but it was worse than his sorrow, and I burst into tears—so melancholy was that soft, sweet smile—and I promised myself, that I would never again seek to put such constraint on him. Before God! who hears me, I swear to you, that I have never reproached him with his grief. Only, gradually, I am growing more and more discouraged, and overpowered. Seeing him careless of everything, I have become myself careless of everything, likewise. I have let things go, as they would themselves. In this house all is neglected; the grass grows everywhere in our garden, as it will soon grow green upon the grave of a poor old woman, who is no longer good for aught upon the earth, since she can console her son no longer."

This desperation was so painfully contrasted with the firmness which I had always seen before, in the manner of Madame Secherin, that I was afraid. This gradual weakening of her mind, seemed to exhibit a strange correspondent weakening of her body. I tried to console her, speaking of my own example.

"Doubtless," I said, "these two years must have seemed cruelly long to you; but consider, that even the longest grief consumes itself in the end. The more violent the regrets of your son, the nearer his deliverance is approaching. I too, dear mother, have felt much grief; I have not only lost the man to whom I had consecrated my whole life, but I have lost my child; and with it all the hopes of happiness that I can ever dream of. Well! even to these sad tortures there has succeeded a sort of tranquillity. A sad tranquillity, indeed; but one which may be almost said to resemble happiness, when compared to the torments I have undergone. Courage! then! courage, dearest mother; I doubt not, that even now you are drawing nigh to the termination of your sorrows. As your son is, so am I—the victim of this bad woman. An icy scorn has already taken the place, with me, of hatred. The hour is not far off in which your son will feel as I do."

Madame Secherin shook her head, sadly; and replied to me, with a degree of calm, good sense, which I must say alarmed me. "It is by no means a parallel case! Your husband was of your own rank and standing. To you, he was a man neither superior nor inferior to those whom you were used to see. This, therefore, renders it less intolerable in your case; while my poor boy never knew a woman, who, in exterior at least, could compare with this wretch!"

Then finding once again a flash of her ancient energy, Madame Secherin exclaimed: "But she—vile wanton—in her unblushing pride, seems to have calculated but too truly, when, with the boldness of the fiend himself, she told me that women, like herself, were not forgotten; and that my son would regret her for ever—would bewail her with tears of blood! Oh, my God! my God! thy will is impenetrable! great, indeed, must be our faith, not to despair of thy justice! She must, indeed, love her child dearly, who loves on, knowing all her affection useless!"

Madame Secherin returned, again and again, to this thought, which appeared so frightful; and it was all in vain that I strove to turn her from it. "Believe it not," I said; "without you, without your incessant care, the life of your son would have been a thousand times more fearful than it is."

"How can that be? he could not regret this woman more than he now regrets her," replied Madame Secherin, with stubborn obstinacy "Yes!

it is so—for were he not so wretched, I should call him a bad and ungrateful son."

"Ah! madam——"

"I should say that he remains with me only from regard to appearances; and because, in the first moment of his rage, he swore never to pardon this base wretch. Oh! I have suffered cruelly without complaining of it. Within the last two years, I have endured much in silence. Formerly he believed in the virtue of this woman. Then I could understand his preferring her to me. But, after what has passed—to think that she should still possess his heart—that does, indeed, offend—does, indeed, enrage me!"

"You are, perhaps, mistaken yet," I answered her. "We may still experience anger for a long time, and hatred against those who deceive us, without being, on that account, subject to their influence. Generous hearts are, above all others, liable to these lasting sentiments—treachery inflicts pain on them, deep in proportion, as their confidence was unlimited."

"Blessed be your arrival here," said Madame Secherin, wiping her eyes; "I have been enabled to say that to you, which I could not have uttered to any other living being. For the last two years, my heart has been full of bitterness. Please God! That it may not overflow, and that my son may not learn the anguish he has caused me. Nevertheless, it must break out in the end—there must come a moment when I shall be able to contain myself no longer!"

"Ah! Heaven forbid," cried I; "were that to be the case, what would be your life, and what his?"

"I shall grow weary in the end—not of devoting myself to him—no! the few days that I have left belong to him; but I shall grow weary in the end of seeing him suffer, as if he were alone, and abandoned by all. I shall grow weary in the end of seeing, that the base recollection of a wanton woman is effacing from my son's heart the gratitude which he owes me! Tell me, then—tell me," she exclaimed, her anger and her grief increasing as she spoke, "is it not terrible to see our son perishing by a slow fire, and not to know how to save him, when it is to that end only that God has left us on the earth?"

This rapid conversation showed me, that the life of Monsieur Secherin and his mother was more horrible than I had suspected. At this moment, I saw M. Secherin pass slowly before the window, stop for a moment, look at me, and again retire.

I thought he was coming to join us, but it was not so. Fancying that he might wish to speak with me in private, I sought some pretext for going out to meet him, when suddenly his mother said to me:

"Undoubtedly, my son wished to speak with you, but now he has lost the courage to do so. I see he is walking yonder, slowly, in the yoke-elm alley."

I took the opportunity, saying, "If you will permit me, I will go to him—you know he had ever some confidence in me; perhaps I shall be able to restore to him his courage—perhaps I may assist him in shaking off this insurmountable sadness."

Madame Secherin stretched out her hand to me, but shook her head sadly as she did so.

"Always generous," she said, "always kind."

"At least," replied I, "always ready to sympathize with the sufferings which I have shared myself."

I found M. Secherin walking in the same alley, in which I had formerly heard M. de Lancry's first avowal of love for Ursula. As I drew near to my cousin, I was yet more struck, than I had been before, by the change which I discovered in his features. Alas! why should it be, that misfortune and despair alone, should have the power to set a stamp of dignity on the most ordinary features! while happiness and joy never seem to ennoble them.

The face of M. Secherin, once so florid, so joyous, and so smiling, was now as pale as marble, and almost frightfully emaciated. His hollow eyes, reddened by constant tears, gleamed with a feverish fire; his features wore an expression of fierce grief, which gave to them a character of elevation, which I never could have conceived in them.

When he saw me he shuddered, turned his eyes up toward heaven, and cried in a dull and stifled voice—

"SHE injured you too—you too, cruelly!"

"Yes! very cruelly, my cousin, very cruelly!" I answered; "but I have courage. I, like you, have been betrayed, abandoned—but at this hour I despise, I forget, those who have insulted me. Tranquillity has again taken possession of my heart; yet, unlike you, I have no mother to console me."

M. Secherin answered me nothing—he stalked close up to me with unequal strides, stopped suddenly before me, folding his arms over his heart, and exclaimed, in a burst of rage, while his eyes sparkled with excitement, 'I have not yet killed your husband! I must seem very cowardly to you—do I not? But patience! patience!" he continued, resuming his dark and sullen air. "My poor old mother cannot live for ever!"

And with these words he again began to walk to and fro in silence. These words explained to me much that had before seemed inexplicable in the conduct of M. Secherin. In spite of his good temper, he was a man of courage; he waited doubtless for his mother's death in order to exact a bloody retribution! I loved M. de Lancry, it is true, no longer; yet the idea of this duel struck me with horror, and I answered, "Your mother will live so long, that your regrets will grow weaker, and that you will leave the punishment of the guilty to their God and Maker."

M. Secherin burst into a fit of savage laughter, before he answered: "Leave my revenge to God! Ah!" he continued, dropping his voice as he spoke, and speaking in a tone that made me shudder—"Do you know, that sometimes I think she lives too long for my vengeance!"

"Oh, this is terrible?" I exclaimed; "you—you, who have ever been so good a son!"

"I am no longer a good son!" he answered, his rage still increasing. "I am no longer anything but a madman, who pass one half my life in calling on a shameless wanton! the other in cursing her—in dreaming upon vengeance. Can you believe it?—there are even moments when I feel capable of abandoning my mother, although I know that, to do it, would be her death-stroke!"

"What do you mean?"

"Yes! I am capable of anything—when I think that your husband might die before me—that Ursula might think me a coward—think that I dare not fight!"

I looked at M. Secherin in mute astonishment. His fear of seeming cowardly in the eyes of Ursula, proved how tremendous must be the strength, even now, of his passion for her.

"You must forget Ursula—she is unworthy even of a single thought."

He shrugged his shoulders—"You too," he said, "you too then are like my mother. Forget her, do you say? forget her? Why, then, not tell my heart to beat no longer—my blood to flow no longer through my veins in streams of fire—my memory of all things to evanish!"

"But think what a wretch this woman is."

"Yet she is *adored*—wretch as she is—*adored!* Did not your husband leave you for her—you, who are worth ten thousand such as she?" exclaimed M. Secherin, almost brutally.

One moment—I confess it—I remained without an answer. It must be indeed the fact, that Ursula possessed extraordinary powers of fascination—when two men, of characters so different as M. de Lancry and M. Secherin, were furiously in love with her! My cousin went on with a dark and gloomy brow—"Forget her! forget her! and why should I forget her? Up to the day when she forgot her duty, who ever did for me what she did?"

"Your mother, surely——"

"My mother!—oh! my mother is only my mother, and my wife was—my wife!" he cried, passionately. "The time which I spent with Ursula will ever be the fairest of my life. She, who was so much above me in intellect and education—she, who lowered herself to my level! And then so beautiful—so beautiful! Oh! the long nights which I have spent foaming with rage, raving her name in our deserted chamber! Forget her—but you know not, perhaps, that I loved her as much for her maddening beauty, as for her dazzling wit. Forget her! and for what?—to live *tête-a-tête* with my mother? truly, a pleasant compensation!"

"But what you say now is positively frightful. Do you think that it must not be painful, beyond all things, to her, to see how impotent are her best consolations?"

"My mother! why, what can she desire more? She is happy—contented. I have abandoned Ursula to her fate. I swore, by the memory of my father, never to look upon her more—never to pardon her! and, cost me what it may, my promise shall be kept! But why should my mother dispute with me the poor solace of a tear—a tear which I conceal from her, so far as I can? And yet—" and, as he spoke, the big drops burst out from his eyes, and rolled down his cheeks. He seated himself on the stone bench, sobbing convulsively. Terrified by this fearful love, I remained silent.

"See, now! I am ridiculous—wild—mad!" My cousin took up the word once more, wiping his eyes as he spoke. "I know it—but, what would you have? my feelings are too strong for me. Despise me—I deserve it—for I love her still!"

"You love her still?"

"Yes! it is shameful—is it not? It is disgusting—but I love her now as much as I have ever loved her!"

"Good God! can it be possible?"

"Ay! it is in vain that I try to reason—it is in vain that I say to myself, that her conduct with your husband was a thousand times more base, than if she had given way to passion. It is in vain that I tell myself, she must have been corrupt indeed to give herself up as she did. Now, mark me! had it not been for my mother, twenty times would I have gone to M. de Lancry, and I would have slain him, or he should have slain me. If I had killed him, I would have thrown myself at the feet of Ursula, and forgiven her all—and sure I am that, by indulgence, by kindness, and by love, I could have brought her back to the paths of virtue. For, look you! no one knows her as I know her," he said, again wiping his eyes; "it is her head, and not her heart, that is to blame."

"Cousin, I love not to attack the absent; but your wife has done me so much wrong, that I must speak to you of her, as I think—far less for the purpose of dwelling on the past, than of leading you to conquer an unworthy passion. Ursula is as false, as she is malicious: for ten whole years, she hated me, and yet, for ten whole years, she ever treated me with hypocritic tenderness."

"But, after all, she did not love your husband," cried he, without replying to my words. "Had it not been for my mother, I could have profited by her confession, to break off that intrigue in the beginning. But women are ever implacable in their anger. My mother has never been able to forget that I once sacrificed her to Ursula. Oh! she remembers it well; and, had it been the question, whether I must lose the whole happiness of my life—whether I must die of grief, and she likewise—still, for the satisfaction of her vengeance, I must swear never to pardon Ursula."

"But the life which you are leading must be a very hell!"

"Yes, yes, it is a hell! Before my mother I restrain myself; but I suffer almost martyrdom. At other times, I curse myself for my insensibility to her efforts at consoling me—I feel all the grief which I cause her, but I have no power to help it—so weak am I—so cowardly, and so base. A hell, did you say? yes indeed, it is a hell! And yet, my poor mother is the very best of women; while I—I am but a wretch myself—and yet, in truth, I love her—yes, love her tenderly; and, notwithstanding that, I am aware that I afflict her—that I wound her incessantly. Oh, heaven! accursed be the lot which united me to Ursula! I should have married a woman of my own class. Never would my life, and the life of my good mother, have been thus poisoned. If you knew what is the existence which I lead—my God! if you only knew it! I do not take the least interest in my business; I know not how my fortunes are going on. I have taken a man of business for my agent, on purpose that I need not meddle with it. What is the use, to me, of money, now? It was for HER that I sought wealth. She knew it, she could have made me do all that she would. I am sure that I could have found the means to double my fortune, because it would have given her pleasure; and it was recompense enough to see her lovely features light up with brilliant happiness—to have her thank me with her own sweet smile."

Then, thrusting his two clenched fists into his eyes—"Her smile—her expression! no, never! never shall I see them more! I have deserved it all—I had not the courage to forgive her, I listened to the pitiless hatred of my mother: I was not then a man; I acted like an infant—like an idiot!"

Then, after walking to and fro, with agitated steps, for a few minutes, he said—"Pardon me, my cousin. Alas! you see the life, which, for two years past, I have been leading with my mother in this house, cold and quiet as the tomb. Through the long day I walk, still walk, I know not whither. I return home to dine, and, while the meal is going on, I look at the spot where SHE used to sit. After that, I stay with my mother; and by turns, we read aloud, each to the other: when it is my turn, I read mechanically; without hearing, without understanding what I do read. At eleven o'clock my mother prays aloud, and we retire. Then I betake myself to *our* chamber—which I cannot prevail on myself to give up—then commence agonies of sleepless grief; then, as on the very day when she forsook me, I endure all the torments of desperate and frenzied jealousy—when I think ———"

Then, without finishing his sentence, M. Secherin drew himself up to his full height, stamped his foot fiercely on the ground, and raising his hands toward heaven, "Oh! I will kill that man! I will kill him!" he exclaimed, and began again to stride vehemently to and fro. At this moment, one of the servants girls of Madame Secherin came to request us, from her, to return to the drawing-room.

"My son," said she, as soon as we entered, "your cousin is probably in haste to return to Paris. We must not detain her."

"That is indeed the truth," said I; "it is a very important matter, and one which will not permit any delay. Had it not been for that, I should have requested your hospitality for a few days."

"You, at least, have spoken to him sensibly, I doubt not," said Madame Secherin, pointing to her son.

"I have spoken to him of you, madam—and it is impossible that any son should be more affectionate or respectful—pray believe me."

"I believe you readily—for I have no desire but for his good."

"He knows it, madam," I replied, making a little sign to M. Secherin, as I spoke, in order to induce him to address some kind words to his mother. His coldness frightened me; and I began to fear that Madame Secherin would take advantage of my presence, to make him some reproaches, which she had been so long repressing.

M. Secherin approached his mother, took her hand, and kissed it tenderly, saying—"Pardon me, my dear mother; you know that for some time past I have been suffering very deeply. It is this which has made my conduct appear somewhat uneven. I have made my confession to my cousin—she has been scolding me for it soundly," he added, with a melancholy smile, "and I will endeavour to behave more discreetly in future."

"I presume that will cost you a great effort," said his mother, sternly.

I feared terribly that what I apprehended was now about to happen; for Madame Secherin, feeling herself wounded in my presence, in her tenderest point of maternal dignity, could no longer pass in silence her son's fatal passion, or the grief which it had so long entailed upon her. I cast a supplicating glance toward M. Secherin, to implore him to moderate his feelings; but he, too, had been for a long time gradually growing soured. My presence had awakened the smart of their wounds anew. I shuddered, as I felt that I might but too probably be the involuntary cause of an afflicting scene.

M. Secherin, however, stooped his head, without answering a word to his mother, who went on, still raising her voice as she spoke:

"It should be the part of a good son to love his mother above everything."

"Whatever it may have cost me, I have done all that is in my power to prove to you my submission, my dear mother," her son answered coldly: "I can now do no more."

"This, then, is the life which this wretch has made for us. This wretch, whom he still regrets!" exclaimed Madame Secherin. "It is in your power, at least, not to regret a vile wanton!" she repeated yet more violently.

Terrified by the turn which the conversation seemed to be taking, I said hastily—

"Alas! madam! he loved her so dearly!"

"He is capable of still loving her—still, even!—a degraded love makes men commit every kind of baseness."

The eyes of my cousin flashed like fire, as he exclaimed: "It is not only a degraded love that makes men commit baseness, my mother. Now, once for all, I have been restraining myself long—I have been suffering long—I must now speak to the end ———"

"And I, also!" cried his mother angrily. "I, too, have suffered long—it is too long, indeed, that you have forgotten the duties you owe me. I repeat it to you—I do, that your unworthy sorrows are so many proofs of baseness—are so many insults against your mother!"

"Cousin!" cried I, for I saw that he could restrain himself no longer——

"The noblest sentiments—the noblest duties—at times also make men commit base actions! Do you hear, mother?"

"What would he say?"

"Not a word more?" said I to M. Secherin; and I added in a low voice—"Would you then kill your mother by letting her imagine, so near her last hour, that you are about to run the risk of a duel?"

"It is true!—it is true! I am mad—I am a wicked son, to reply thus to her; my regrets seem to insult her, because she loves me so tenderly." Then, kneeling down before his mother, he took her hand, and kissed it, saying—"Pardon me, my mother! I was wrong to talk to you thus.

"A mother ought to pardon everything," she answered, with a deep sigh; and then, kissed her son on the forehead, looking at me with an expression of wild sorrow.

"And a son ought to endure everything," replied M. Secherin, in a low voice; and his eye likewise wandered to mine, to call me as a witness to his sorrows.

I quitted Rouvrai in a fit of the deepest melancholy. I could not conceive anything in the world more painful than the position of that mother and that son; always face to face with each other—she mourning over the insane passion of her son—he constantly regretting the lost love of that guilty woman.

I could not restrain a gesture of fierce indignation, when I reflected that my husband was lost to me for ever—that my child was dead—that my life was spirit-broken—that a pious mother and a generous son felt that their intercourse, once so affectionate and tender, was now embittered, and for ever—and all this, because Ursula had envied and hated me in her childhood!

CHAPTER III.

THE RETURN.

Two months after my departure from Maran, I was established in Paris, in the small house which Madame de Richeville had offered me.

I cannot but inquire of myself, even yet, by what means I could have succeeded in inspiring this excellent woman with the affection which she has never ceased to bear me, and of which she gave me new proofs, the very moment I returned to Paris. For it was with the tenderest—the most maternal interest, that she watched over my smallest wishes, that she laboured to spare me the most trifling causes of vexation.

When I thought of the base calumnies of which she had been the victim, I could not but wonder at the terms of intimate acquaintance on which she lived with persons, who certainly represented the most select of the best company in Paris; and who even passed, to use a common-place expression, for being not a little *stiff-necked.*

This change in the opinion of the world, in Madame de Richeville's case, ought not to have caused me much astonishment. For persons of the strictest morals, are more or less indulgent to the past errors of one who seeks their countenance, in proportion as her present life is more or less irreproachable.

Justly proud of the kind of *worldly conversion*, which their salutary influence has effected, they defend and support their neophytes with all the generous ardour of proselytism.

Madame de Richeville had, therefore, won all those who had formerly sincerely pitied her misfortunes, and deplored her faults, to be her sincere friends. Thanks to the last sacrifices which her husband had compelled her to make, her house was indeed very comfortable; but not so splendid, that the eagerness shown by all persons to be admitted to it, could be attributed to any cause, other than her extreme grace in doing its honours.

The portraits which she had made of several persons who formed her familiar circle, were striking in the extreme. By chance, I had an opportunity of judging of this, on the very day of my arrival in Paris.

My carriage had broken down at Etampes, and, delayed by the accident, I did not reach Paris, quite contrary to my expectation, until 10 o'clock in the evening. No longer expecting me on that day, she had admitted her friends as usual: so that to my great astonishment, when my carriage stopped under the peristyle, I found Madame de Richeville there, accompanied by the Prince d'Hericourt, My courier, who had preceded me by about half-an-hour, had announced my approach, and Madame de Richeville had come down to meet me the sooner.

I found at her house, that evening, the Princess d'Hericourt, and Mesdames de Semur and de Grandval, who received me with the greatest affability and kindness that can be imagined. It is absolutely necessary to have lived in the society which I wish to describe, in order to comprehend their mode of receiving me—at the same time reserved and full of kindness. The history of my sorrows was well known; but with the delicacy of extreme discretion, they spared me all allusion to those evils, which they all wished me to forget.

To explain exactly in what consisted these shades of conduct, so slight and delicate as they were, would be almost impossible; and yet, by means of these nothings, their greeting seemed the result only of a sincere and kind anxiety, instead of bearing the stamp of a forced and indiscreet compassion.

So long as the hereditary good manners and knowledge of the world possessed by our ancient aristocracy, exist, there will never be, in Europe, any society capable of comparison with our best society, for that exquisite tact and that good taste, which appear to be prerogatives attached to the French intellect. Therefore it is, that never, while I live, shall I forget the words of the venerable Princess d'Hericourt, when I was presented to her on that evening, by the Duchess de Richeville.

"Although I have the pleasure of beholding you to-day, for the first time, madam," she said to me, "I know you well; and permit me to say, that I have loved you since I have heard our dear Amelia (this was Madame de Richeville's christian name,) speak of you. Myself and her other friends, who are yours also, have all been persuading her to hurry your return to Paris. At your age—an old grandmother may so speak to you—at your age, solitude is very dangerous. As soon as we isolate ourselves entirely from all society, so soon do we begin to suspect the world of selfishness and insensibility. But I assure you it is not so! I have ever seen the noblest and most touching sympathies elicited by the sight of noble and touching misfortunes!"

"And I, madam," said the Countess de Semur to me, very gravely, and with her wonted manner of vivacious cordiality, "even if I should be accused of paradox, as I very often am, I must confess that I should be almost glad to know that you were at the far-end of Touraine—for, in truth, you were our ideal. When we wished to console ourselves that we could not see you, we used to say, that the ideal was dreamed of, but never seen—while now, if we were about to lose you, we should love you the more, and regret your loss so much the more deeply."

Here, when I attempted modestly to disclaim these exaggerated praises, the Princess d'Hericourt took me by the hand, and said, in a voice of deep emotion: "Will you, I pray you, madam, believe that there are other things which may be admired in a young woman, besides her beauty, her grace, and her wit—and you will then perceive the difference that exists between dangerous flattery, and real homage paid to real merit."

After these singularly striking compliments, I drew near to Emma. She was dressed in a very simple white frock—the massive bands of her superb hair, gracefully waving over her brow, defined the outlines of her sweet oval face, of the purest white and pink that can be conceived. I thought her beauty positively dazzling. When she had visited me at Maran, she was about fourteen; since that time, two years had passed, and brought perfection to her figure—slight and erect as that of the antique Diana.

I make this mythological comparison, because the features of Emma, like her slightest gestures, were stamped with a serious, chaste, and reflective grace, which would have been called majesty, if that term had been applicable to a young girl of sixteen, with great azure eyes, and a fresh smile full of young and childish grace.

This evening, as was her custom, Emma was making tea, and offering it to every one with little marks of forethought, which struck me as exquisitively touching. Thus, in presenting a cup of tea to the Princess d'Hericourt, she took the opportunity of kissing the hand of the princess, just as she touched the saucer; and then, again, remembering that Madame de Semur was not fond of strong tea, she had the presence of mind to weaken it. If I dwell on these seemingly childish details, it is because Emma performed the actions with that delicate tact, which hindered them from seeming childish.

Never shall I forget the melancholy smile of Madame de Richeville, and the glance which she turned upon me, as Emma said to her in her low soft-toned voice, "May I give you some tea, *madam*?"

Alas! that cold and distant word, *madam*, seemed to hurt the unhappy mother—she was, however, forced to submit herself. In the world's eyes, her daughter was to her but Mademoiselle de Lostanges, an orphan, and a distant relative.

After a few days, when Emma gave me her confidence, I could admire the treasures of that ingenious soul. Her heart was so sincere, so right minded, so at variance with every thing that could seem to disagree with its natural elevation, that there were certain faults and vices which it must have been impossible for Emma to comprehend.

Crimes were, in her eyes, consequences without cause—horrible accidents! The odious calculations, the disorganized principles which lead to the commission of a baseness, or a crime, were beyond her understanding; strangely and wonderfully bounded as it was, within the range of all evil passions. Emma was an exception, as rare in her kind, as were Ursula and Mademoiselle de Maran in theirs.

It was long ere I could discover the cause of the dreamlike sorrow, which appeared to augment Emma's melancholy air and expression. The poor child regretted still the mother, whom they told her she had lost while in the cradle. Her gratitude toward Madame de Richeville was sincere and tender; but Emma reckoned thus, in the calm innocence of her simple heart.

"If a distant relation is so kind to me, what would my mother have been," had she lived?"

Having discovered the secret of Emma's sadness, I took good care not mention it to Madame de Richeville. It would have been dealing her a cruel blow, had I done so. In her adoration of her daughter, she might, perhaps, even have been tempted to disclose to her the secret of her birth; and I dared not look forward to the terrible confusion which such a disclosure would have wrought in Emma's sentiments as regarded Madame de Richeville. How terrible a strife would have been awakened in the soul of that young girl! so proudly virtuous—so startlish at the very thought of crime; when she should hear that her mother was but too guilty, and that her birth—poor child! her own—was but the consequence of a deep sin.

Emma was frankness itself; and yet, though I did not by any means want quickness, I could see that there was something about her mysterious, which I could not understand. Strange to say, I was convinced that she had a secret—and yet knew not, herself, what that secret was. I saw her to be incapable of concealing the most trifling of her impressions. She had not spoken of her dreamlike sadness, touching the memory of her mother, to Madame de Richeville, only because she felt that such a confession would have been painful to her, who had shielded her with maternal care. I foresaw, then, that Emma concealed something from me, not through falsehood, but through pure ignorance—because she could no more explain or define, than I could myself, certain fantastical points of her conduct which had struck me.

Thus, when winter came and she saw the first snow fall, she turned pale as that snow itself; shuddered, and said in a dolorous tone—"Alas! the snow!" I was alone with her, and asked her wherefore that painful cry? She answered, "I know not wherefore; but it seemed to pain me, when I spoke, to see the snow fall; now I care nothing for it."

I asked her, whether the thought of the poor wretches, who might be suffering in that snow, had anything to do with her exclamations? She answered me simply, 'No; that she pitied them deeply, but at the moment had not thought about them. At the sight of the snow, her heart had been impressed painfully, she knew not wherefore; but that the impression had already passed away.'

Another time before her mother and myself, there was some mention made, I know not what, of swallows. Emma's eyes filled with tears; and she said to us, with a sweet smile, "I know not why it is—but when I hear speak of swallows, I feel a softly sweet sensation, and have an inclination to weep."

To conclude my reminiscences, one day, while some troops were passing the house, to the sound of clarions—Emma rose to her feet, erect, with a kindled eye, bright cheek, and haughty air, and listened to the martial notes with an expression, bearing the stamp of sudden heroism.

The clarions passed, the sound died away. Emma, looking round her in astonishment, fell, blushing and confused into the arms of Madame de Richeville, and taking her hand, laid it on her bosom with enchanting grace, as she said—"Pardon me! I am very foolish, but I could not refrain from doing so;—feel how my heart beats."

And, in truth, her heart did beat as though it would have bounded from her bosom. What then was this mystery? what was the secret cause of these agitations, of these wild emotions? Alas! at a later period I discovered it—but at this moment, Emma was as ignorant of it as I was.

With the exception of these involuntary, unforeseen movements of her spirit, every thought of that pure and ingenious soul, could be read as distinctly as though it had been reflected on the most lucid crystal. Such at this time was Emma.

By degrees it will be seen how her character expanded in its lovely ignorance — like flowers which know not the sweetness of the perfumes which they spread around them, or of the tints of the colours which diversify their petals.

While I was yet at Maran, I had implored Madame de Richeville not to write me one word concerning Ursula or M. de Lancry; I then shunned every mention of their odious names. But now at Paris, surrounded by new friends, I was bolder. Madame de Richeville had been well informed, by persons who were thoroughly acquainted with my husband's conduct; and through her I soon learned, that Mademoiselle de Maran was redoubling her calumnies and bitterness against me. As soon as she had brought Ursula to town, she gave her apartments in her own house; putting it forth everywhere, that my jealousy, no less violent than it was ungrounded, had brought about the separation of M. Secherin and his wife; and that I had, in fact, denounced my cousin to her husband; giving, as the sole proof of her misconduct, some trivial acts of imprudence.

My aunt went on to say, that this procedure was the more intolerable on my part—since my intrigue with M. Lugarto left me no right to complain of my husband's infidelity, or to find fault with the conduct of other women. And lastly, that M. de Lancry, already alienated from me by the violence of my temper, having discovered that during his absence in England I had carried my audacity so far as to pass a night in the house of M. Lugarto, had abandoned me. Mademoiselle de Maran likewise said, that notwithstanding the affection she bore me, she could not but confess that M. de Lancry was in the right; and that she esteemed it her duty to defend her poor Ursula, against the slanders which I had heaped on her—the *victim* of my jealousies and crimes.

These falsehoods, absurd as they were, could not have failed to become dangerous likewise, had not Madame de Richeville, in order to forewarn her friends against such infamous reports, recounted to them the whole scene which had occurred in the lonely house of M. Lugarto, as she had heard it from M. de Mortagne on his death-bed.

These disclosures, with the past life of M. de Lancry, and the present conduct of Ursula, sufficed to defend me against the base accusations of my aunt. The revolution of July, by dividing and scattering the *legitimist* society, had depopulated the drawing-rooms of Mademoiselle de Maran. For in truth, she had only owed the attentions paid her since the restoration, to the dread which she inspired, and to the powerful enmities, and no less powerful protections, which she could excite or extend at her pleasure.

When there was nothing to be feared, nor hoped for at her hands, people began to weary of her—for her malignity increased with her increasing years. Her home offered now no inducements, no pleasures; her economy had degenerated into avarice, so that by degrees she found herself left wholly alone.

The annoyance which she felt at this, was the real cause of her visit to Maran. To console herself for her other vexations, she came to do me all the evil in her power.

In taking sides with Ursula against her mother-in-law, and in proposing to conduct her to Paris, she had obeyed, in the first instance, her instinctive hatred against me; and secondly, when she learned the power of Ursula's new fascinations, she resolved to profit by my cousin's charms to give a new attraction to her drawing-rooms.

She knew the world, perhaps, better than any other person in it—she announced everywhere that Ursula was separated from her husband. Now, there is always an irresistible desire among men to attempt the conquest of a young and lovely woman, left in a solitary and independent situation; so that ere long Mademoiselle de Maran's house was no longer lonely: and Ursula, prettier and more daringly coquettish than she had ever been before, was constantly surrounded by a numerous crowd of courtiers. M. de Lancry, informed of every thing that was going on by a confidential man, whom he had sent to Paris, was now almost beside himself with jealousy. It was then that he deserted me, and set off to rejoin Ursula.

What I have now to say will appear, at first, almost incredibly disgraceful —unhappily, as I have advanced in life, I have too often been the witness of similar acts of meanness. Let every one ask his own memory, and he will speedily discover that the facts I am about to record are neither exaggerated nor impossible; and that on the contrary, they are more remarkable for the sort of strange delicacy which environed them, than for the baseness from which they sprung.

Ursula was passionately fond of extravagance—of splendour, pleasures, fêtes; but in the house of Mademoiselle de Maran, she found none of these splendid delights. My aunt, who was rich enough to live in noble style, was farther than ever from thinking of giving balls, taking boxes at the great theatres, or keeping up her house in a style more elegant or extended than she had done before.

M. de Lancry, when he came to Paris, found Ursula carrying on a sort of privileged flirtation, with two or three men of my aunt's society. Despite his blind and frantic passion, he was too well acquainted with the sex in general, and with particular women, also, not to have guessed the tastes of Ursula.

From respect both to himself and her, he could not offer to satisfy her taste for luxury and expense; for it was well known that her dowry consisted of but sixty thousand francs; and, had the source of her extravagance been once known, she would have soon found herself driven ignominiously out of that society, in which she so much wished to shine.

De Lancry, whether with, or without the connivance of my aunt—for that I have never been able to discover—found a very ingenious mode of effecting his end, by giving, namely, to his mistress the highest position in the world; and that not only without stripping her of any character, but rather surrounding her with the sympathies of a fashionable clique, at the head of which was Mademoiselle de Maran.

Had it not been, however, for the hatred which she bore me, my aunt doubtless would have refused, indignantly, to play the shameful part of accomplice, which she adopted in this infamous transaction.

As to the manner in which I became acquainted with the following details, it is connected with a new train of mysterious circumstances; which proved that, most unhappily for me, the evil genius of M. Lugarto was yet circling around me and around all that was, from hour to hour, becoming dearer to me.

CHAPTER IV.

THE LETTER.

About three months after my arrival, Blondeau handed me a little packet, which a messenger had brought. I opened it, and grew pale with affright, when I discovered a bouquet of those venomous crimson flowers, which M. Lugarto had formerly sent to me, and which had since been to me a symbol of his ill-will. Madame de Richeville had received a similar bouquet, on the day of M. de Mortagne's death. With the flowers was a letter, written by my husband to one of his friends, whose name I did not know, since the envelop had been destroyed. How could M. Lugarto, who, as I imagined, was absent from Paris, have intercepted M. de Lancry's correspondence? I was not able to guess; but I was not surprised that this man—possessed as he was of an immense fortune—should succeed in corrupting domestics, or having creatures of his own in the houses of persons, whose movements he was watching.

As to the object of this communication, there could be no doubt. Unacquainted with my indifference toward M. de Lancry, M. Lugarto thought that he should wound me to the quick, by unveiling the mysteries of the conduct of my husband and Ursula. Though this intention was not absolutely fulfilled, this letter, as was easily to be supposed, conjured up many painful remembrances; yet this new perfidy of M. Lugarto bore some better fruits. My husband's letter was as follows:

"Paris, January, 1835.

"I thank you for your letter, my dear friend. Mine may well astonish you; for a month has elapsed since you wrote to ask of me that intelligence to which it alluded, and added these words: 'What has become of you? Can I believe what I hear about you in this desert of mine? Is it true that you are the favoured lover of the most fashionable woman in Paris?—a woman, who, by the power of her wit and beauty, has succeeded in making the world forget that she was once called by the vulgar name of Secherin? Is it true, that Mademoiselle de Maran, the aunt of your wife, your *Euridice*, is on the road to ruin? that she is spending her money like mad; that the splendour of her entertainments, and the extravagance of her establishment, is the world's talk? I should think such dissipation, at her age, rather out of season.'

"I answered at length, one part of your questions; I will now go on, for at this moment my heart is overflowing with gall and bitterness. You are one of those tried men, to whom all secrets may be confided, and who can comprehend all things. You have sunk two enormous inheritances in the hells of Paris; you have killed three men in duels; you have survived a horrible wound, which you gave yourself in an attempt to blow out your brains. Now, superior to such nonsense, as you say, you live like a philosopher, 'thinking and dreaming in an old house, at the far end of Brittany, happy in looking out upon your sand-banks, and listening to the roar of the sea as it dashes over them.' This shows that you have stability of character, and a rare experience of human weakness. You will not be surprised, therefore, at the secrets which remain to be imparted. I am surrounded by people so childish, or so envious, that I would kill myself rather than allow them to suspect what I suffer; it would make them too happy. You will, perhaps, despise me, stoic that you are! No matter; I can endure no longer, without complaining to some one of my torment and my happiness, for my happiness is nothing but torment. Besides, I derived great solace from writing my former letter; I go on, since you say that you can give me no further counsel till you know the end of my story.

"Consumed by jealousy when I learned that Ursula was in Paris surrounded by worshippers, and desiring, with all my heart, to regain my rights, in despite of the little hope that remained after the letter which she had written to me, and which fell into her husband's hands, I quitted Maran. I abandoned my wife and came hither. I found Ursula as beautiful, as capricious, and as fond as ever. When I wanted to speak to her of my past good fortune, she overpowered me with sarcasm: but I contained myself, for I had my plans. Mademoiselle de Maran, my wife's aunt, welcomed me with cordiality. I have told you of her hatred to Matilda, which will assist you in comprehending what follows. I understand Ursula. She has a wild love of extravagance and pleasure, and would sacrifice much to its gratification; but I was well aware that, notwithstanding her poverty, the boldness of her principles, and the impudence of her character; she was, from a strange admixture of pride and independence, incapable of certain meannesses. The best method, therefore, of forcing myself upon her—of ruling her as much as she could be ruled—was to give her the means of indulging in that splendid career, which has been the dream of her whole life; and that, too, without exciting her sensibilities, which are often startled at a shadow.

"To understand the resolve which I then made, you must call to mind, that I never vacillated between the expenditure of any sum of money, however large, and the gratification of any desire, however extravagant. I must also impress you with the fact that I loved, and still love Ursula, with all the ardour, with all the fury of a passion irritated, excited, and—worse than all—unsatisfied. This, then, was the predicament in which I was placed. I was to render myself indispensible to Ursula, by surrounding her with all delights, with all imaginable splendours, without offending her delicacy; and in such a way, that the world should never penetrate the mystery. The avarice of Mademoiselle de Maran, her hatred to my wife, whom she was overjoyed to see ruined, ministered to my wishes.

"One day, in Ursula's presence, I asked Mademoiselle de Maran, in whose house she was living, what were her annual expenses for her house, stable, &c. She answered me, *forty thousand francs*. I cried out that she was robbed—she never received anybody, her carriages were horrible; and that—with a sum like that—if she would trust to me and follow my advice, I would undertake to keep up the best establishment possible.

"'How is that?' said she.

"'Give me forty thousand francs; don't trouble yourself about it, and I will take the charge of your expenses for one year. You shall see in what style I will make you live; only, if you adopt my proposition, you must go and spend some months in the country, to give me time to make the requisite alterations in your hotel; and that without any extraordinary disbursements, for I will bring it within the forty thousand francs a year.'

"Ursula looked at me. It seemed as if she discovered my thoughts, for a smile (oh! if, if you could only see her smile!) rewarded me for my ingenious stratagem. She understood me, of course. Ursula would enjoy all the luxuries that I pretended to furnish with the forty thousand francs of Mademoiselle de Maran ;—the latter, laughing with all her might, acceded to my proposal, (she always laughs when about to commit some outrageous piece of treachery.) Fifteen days after our agreement, Mademoiselle de Maran and Ursula were established at Auteuil, in an enchanting house, which an Englishman, tired of his sojourn, had, I may say, let to me for nothing. I had always a genius for impromptus, when money was not wanting.

"It is useless for me to tell you how much I expended in the arrangement of the house of Auteuil, which I visited every day. It was really a fairy cottage. In the meantime, proceedings at the hotel in Paris advanced rapidly. I commenced the reform on the stables. I replaced the old-fashioned carriages of Mademoiselle de Maran, by the prettiest equipages in Paris. Knowing how fond Ursula was of exercise on horseback, I persuaded Mademoiselle de Maran to let a small apartment at her hotel, then unoccupied, to my uncle, the Duke de Versac, who was completely ruined by the revolution of July; he thus acted as *chaperon* to Ursula in her equestrian excursions with me, and attended her abroad, when Mademoiselle de Maran herself could not accompany her.

"Thanks to my activity, by the commencement of the winter, the hotel de Maran was transformed into a perfect palace. A magnificent suite of rooms on the ground-floor were reserved for reception. The apartments of Ursula, the temple of my cherished idol, were a marvel of luxury and elegance. I filled them with the rarest furniture—precious porcelain vases, admirable draperies, and paintings by the old masters. People said that Mademoiselle de Maran was mad ; for the enormous expense which I lavished on her establishment was, of course, attributed to her. She did not contradict it ; neither did I, for a thousand reasons that you may easily imagine. In the course of the winter Mademoiselle de Maran gave some superb balls ; during Lent a few excellent concerts ; and, on the return of spring, several *soirées champetres* in her immense garden, in which I had wrought wonders.

"The hotel Maran became the most fashionable mansion in Paris. Mademoiselle de Maran had a box at the opera, and one at the comic theatre—all through the power of those eternal forty thousand francs, which she annually gave me. When I handed her the accounts at the end of the year, she burst into a hearty fit of laughter ; declared that I was a magician, and entreated me to continue to be her steward. I had expended more than ten thousand louis. It is superfluous to tell you, that Ursula was the queen of these fêtes given for her, and almost by her ; for she did the honours with exquisite grace and unequalled dignity. She became a finished musician. At the concerts, she displayed talent of the first order. Very soon everybody began to talk about her—her bold and brilliant wit—her lively and sarcastic gaiety—and, above all, her most audacious coquetry, which put me to the torture, and lighted all the fires of jealousy in my heart.

"Even Mademoiselle de Maran yielded to this woman's fascinating influence; indeed, all who approached her, were, in a manner, bewitched. Among women, she was always pleasant, flattering and insinuating ; among men fantastic, provoking, aud coldly indifferent, by turns. By such management she came to be regarded as a living enigma, and she could do anything, however hazardous and daring, without being in the least danger of suffering for her conduct.

"Strange inconsistency ! this woman, who did not at all scruple to enjoy the luxuries with which I provided her, in Mademoiselle de Maran's name, and at the greatest expense, treated me with the greatest harshness—with the most insulting contempt, because I once offered her some jewels to wear at an approaching fête.

"On reflection, however, this did not astonish me. Ursula is full of tact : it is known that she is poor ; and less personal luxury would be deemed sufficient for her. Accordingly, she has adopted a style peculiar to herself, combining perfect simplicity with extreme elegance. She has a charming neck, and beautifully white arms, so fresh, and so exquisitely rounded, that there is positive coquetry in her refusing to wear necklaces and bracelets.

"Her evening dress was always of white crape, wonderfully rich, and in admirable taste ; she wore a natural flower in her beautiful hair, and a bouquet in her bosom ; but these were her only ornaments. In the morning, she wore a little *capote*, and an exceedingly plain dress, with a large cashmere shawl. You see that a dowry of sixty thousand francs ought to last her for a long time. Amid the magnificence which surrounds her, she seems as proud and as happy in doing the honours, as though she were the mistress of the house, instead of being merely a substitute; for this singular woman less enjoys the possession of luxury than the enjoyment of it. This distinction may appear, to you, subtle; were you to know Ursula, you would find it correct.

"Notwithstanding my devotedness and my sacrifices, I am often unhappy. I am conscious of being necessary to Ursula: I am sure she would not willingly renounce her power over me. But what a power it is.

"After our first interview after the letter which she wrote to me, that was discovered by her husband, she ought to have been very much confused. Notwithstanding what you are pleased to call my *libertinism*, she was much more embarrassed than I. This would not surprise you, were you familiar with her temper—the flexibleness, audacity, and superiority of her mind.

"'Do you, really, entertain the opinions which you wrote?' said I to her.

"She began laughing—she always laughs—and answered: 'Are you one of those blind individuals, who always confound the present with the past? Cannot that which was true yesterday be false to-day? Do not disturb yourself by trying to find out, whether what I wrote to you under circumstances entirely different from those which now exist, was, or was not, my true sentiments. You love me, you say? Act, then, as if I loved you; or, as if I seemed to love you. To force me to feign an emotion which I do not feel, would be still less flattering than to inspire me with one which I avow. If I loved you sincerely, your heart would be gratified; if I affected to love you, your pride would triumph. At all events, the part which you have to play is pleasant enough, I trust.'

"What to reply to such paradoxes, such absurdities! above all, when those absurdities are murmured in your ear by a mouth of coral with teeth of pearl—by fresh, sensual and crimsoned lips, whose corners are slightly shadowed by an almost imperceptible down!—what to reply when those words were accompanied by a deep, ardent, and voluptuous look!—oh! you know not the magnetic power of those two large blue eyes, under their long lashes and faintly-pencilled eyebrows of ebony, darting passion, when they will, into the recesses of your soul, or maliciously freezing you by their mocking disdain!—no, no! such eyes as those were never seen before.

"I did not shrink from any sacrifice. I entered upon a life of perpetual agitation, for this woman is incomprehensible; I cannot tell in what light she regards me. She seems to feel an irresistible passion, to which she yields with a kind of tender vexation. It is impossible for me to tell you what she is, especially in these moments of infatuation and freedom; as impossible as it would be to paint her burning langour, when, yielding to her passion for me, she curses me with an enchanting and passionate grace.

"At this thought my heart beats, my blood boils, my cheeks burn! and yet this intrigue has lasted for more than two years, although I am almost confident she has deceived me; although during these two years I have not, perhaps, enjoyed a single month of complete happiness—for this evasive creature avoids me constantly, and sneers at me, and hurls me from heaven to hell! leaving me amid frightful doubts, which she dissipates the next day by a look or a smile.

"Oh! you cannot imagine what it is to live in these everlasting alternatives of hope and despair—of joy and tears—of anger and love—of mistrust and blindness! You cannot conceive with what infernal art this woman can administer, by drops, the nectar with which she would intoxicate me. Figure to yourself a miserable man, with dry lips, receiving by drops, and at long intervals, the limpid fresh water which is to slake his thirst. Oh! tell me, tell me! would not this be rather to render this thirst insatiable and more burning still? Tell me! would not this make him die of rage? Yet such is my case; I am unceasingly devoured by love. Ursula never yields me enough to satisfy my passion, but always enough to irritate it, and thus render its tyranny more despotic still.

"Oh! the infernal creature! she knows well that burning remembrances of the past produce ardent hopes of the future, and that what is unsatisfied lasts for ever.

"Such is the weakness of my degradation, of my shame. Such, also, is the secret of my senseless and delirious joy, when Ursula condescends to act toward me as a woman, and not as an insolent and disdainful devil. Yet she still persuades me—or rather I persuade myself—that, notwithstanding her savage caprices, Ursula loves me to distraction; and that her strange conduct is intended to prevent me from suspecting her love—a love revolting to her pride. I believe her object in feigning inconstancy and disdain, is to retain possession of my heart; because she thinks I would, perhaps, be satisfied, if I had no more doubt with regard to the sincerity of her affection. I see a proof of violent passion in what formerly appeared to be revolting and unworthy conduct. But then, in my suspicious hours, I take it for granted that she does not love me—that she merely tolerates me, because I find means of flattering her tastes and fancies.

"Is not this frightful? Oh! the miserable creature! She knows well that these irritating doubts of mine constitute the strength of her position! she knows it well!"

"Could I believe myself ingenuously and stupidly loved, as I have been by my wife and by others, indifference and disgust would follow; yet, if I supposed myself impudently trifled with, I would abandon her without hesitation. Curse her! Who can enlighten me? What is your own opinion? And yet I do not ask; it is I alone who can judge of it. If I am incapable of judging, you will not succeed better than I can.

"Another thing which is painful to me is, the struggle of my pride and my self-love. Mademoiselle de Maran avoids, with care, all which might, in the eyes of the world, appear to be a culpable toleration on her part. I have re-sold the house which I bought of M. de Rochegune, and I am now lodged tolerably near the hotel de Maran, at Auteuil. I have also a lodging, so that my apparent rights do not go beyond the limits of ordinary intimacy. As to Ursula, in society, she conducts herself toward me precisely as she does to all other men who pay her attention; and many of my friends have still to ask, whether I am the favoured one or not.

"At one moment, I feel indignant that a *happiness* which costs me so dearly should remain concealed; and I then feel *young* enough to think of compromising Ursula;—at another, fearing to be betrayed, and to pass with the world for a deceived simpleton, I contribute to distract public opinion, by pointing out my rivals.

"Another of the tortures of this unworthy and consuming passion is, that I cannot know with certainty whether Ursula is false to me! I have had her followed. Perhaps she perceived it, for nothing was discovered; and therefore my doubts are not removed. I believe more in her address than in her virtue.

"Another frightful consequence of such amours as this, is, that the deceit—the baseness one has been guilty of, are so many ties the more to chain you to your fatal idol! Sometimes I feel indignant that Ursula does not give me sufficient credit for the evil I have done to others—the griefs I have occasioned—for the money which I have lavished away by handfuls—or the fortune of my wife, who lives alone and unhappy. But these reflections do not move my pity; I have enough of my own unhappiness, without thinking on that of others; and then it is a question of mere money, after all, and I have never known the value of money. My only terror arises from the thought of what I shall become when this fortune is wholly dissipated. Will Ursula choose to accommodate herself to Mademoiselle de Maran's house, when on a more limited scale?—for the latter will never leave her; she is getting old, and she acknowledges the horror she has for solitude. Nothing in the world could now induce her to separate from Ursula. But me!—me!—what will become of me?

"To dispel these fatal thoughts, I will cite you an example of my perseverance, and my care to anticipate the most frivolous caprices of this woman.

"About two months ago, she was sullen toward me: never had I been so unhappy, that is to say, more passionately loving. This was the cause: Ursula having had a fancy to ask a comedy at the hotel de Maran, a theatre had been constructed as if by enchantment: Ursula had given proof of incredible talent in the part of Célisnéne, in the *Misanthrope;* and by one of those contrasts which she delights in, she afterwards played one of Mademoiselle Dejazet's parts in a very light and rather indecent farce. On witnessing these performances one must have become madly in love with Ursula, had he not been so already.

"Everybody was perfectly astounded; the most prejudiced were obliged to admit that, after Mademoiselle Mars, no one could have played Célisnené with so much grace; such delicacy, wit, and above all; with such good *ton*, as to the little farce, Ursula had, to say the least of it, rivalled Dejazet as to artfulness and libertine effrontery; in fact, her success in these two pieces, so different in character, was positively amazing.

"Transported with love and pride, I went to add my praises to that of the crowd which surrounded her; can you imagine her reply? She told me, with her usual insolence and petulance—'When a woman of the world undertakes to act a part in a play, her lover ought to be the last to congratulate her for being so perfect an actress.'

"And then, for several days she was sullen, and would not speak to me. During this time, she compromised herself rather seriously with Lord C—— a very amiable and fashionable man. On that occasion, I was upon the point of breaking off with Ursula. A caprice of this strange creature, by involving me in one of those extravagant expenditures which she made her study to incite, placed me once more under her yoke, more madly fond than ever.

"You must know, that I had caused to be constructed in the centre of the garden attached to the hotel de Maran, a large Swiss *chalet*;* in the spring it served as a ball-room. In the interior, its walls were lined with rustic fir, ornamented with incrustations of foreign wood, of a pale green colour, representing garlands of vine leaves.

"I one day entered the chalet, gloomy and sorrowful. Ursula was there, with Mademoiselle de Maran and Lord C——. Interrupting the conversation which was going on, Ursula pointed to the walls of the pavilion, and said:

"'Dear me! how beautiful it would be to have these walls all lined with natural flowers? Were the interior of the chalet so tapestried, how adorable it would be!—what a pity that this should be only a fairy dream.'

"Lord C—— and Mademoiselle de Maran both affirmed, that such an idea could not be realized. Ursula gave me one of those looks, the power of which she so well understood, and went on talking on other matters. I comprehended her.

"The following day, the entire walls of the chalet had disappeared under a complete tapestry of natural flowers; lattices of willow, closely woven, had been covered with jasmines, white pinks, and white roses, so closely pressed together, and so systematically arranged, that this mass of flowers formed a very even groundwork, upon which larger bouquets of red roses were regularly distributed and attached by bows of sky-blue ribbons, such as are seen in tapestry work.

"It is impossible to state to you the money, the cares, the exertions which it cost me to collect, in twenty-four hours, this enormous quantity of flowers; for there was, perhaps, about one hundred feet of wainscoting to completely cover.

"Ursula deigned to show herself sensible to this attention; she pardoned me the torments she had made me suffer, and I was once more the most fortunate of men.

"Another time, one evening being in the country at Auteuil, the moon shining most magnificently, we were talking of the overture to a new opera, by Auber, then very much in vogue; some persons praised its harmony as being at once melodious and scientific. Ursula, who always takes pleasure in defying me to anything, said, looking at me, 'What a pity that this delicious music cannot, with this gentle gale, reach us from Paris, murmuring among these garden trees.'

"It was then ten o'clock. I left the company for a moment. I returned and managed to detain Ursula and Mademoiselle de Maran till near midnight. All of a sudden we heard this overture in the distance, played by a full orchestra, and reaching us, as Ursula had desired, *upon the gentle gale, murmuring among the garden trees.*

"This may appear to you as marvellous. Nothing could be more simple. Ursula had scarcely uttered her words, before I had dispatched two of my servants to Paris; they arrived there in twenty minutes. One of them, for a considerable sum of money, prevailed upon the leader of the orchestra to come, with all his band, to Auteuil; the other busied himself in procuring private carriages, and had them ready at the door of the theatre, with post-horses, that he might rapidly convey the musicians and their instruments. The opera had been sufficiently studied to enable them to play it without their music books. The performance at the theatre was finished by eleven o'clock: in one hour afterward, the whole orchestra was established at Auteuil, hidden by a clump of trees; and thus was realized Ursula's caprice.

"This time I received scarcely thanks. I had so habituated her to this species of surprise, that she was satiated with the prodigies I effected by the power of gold.

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* A Swis cottage beautifully constructed of wood.

"Exasperated by so much insolence, ingratitude and harshness, I ventured to recriminate; to speak of the sacrifices of all kinds I had made; of my wife, whom I had abandoned; of her fortune, which I had dissipated. Ursula, assuming airs of icy haughtiness and crushing contempt, asked me what I meant to say? whether I was a man of such bad taste, as to reproach her with a *bouquet* or a *seranade?*—making allusion to the tapestry of flowers, and the invisible orchestra. As to my other *sacrifices*, she could not at all comprehend them. Mademoiselle de Maran, tired of living alone, and seeing her isolated position, had proposed to her, Ursula, to come and live in the hotel de Maran with her, and to assist her in doing the honours of the house. This house was very delightful to her, no doubt; thanks to the well directed economy I had used in regulating the expenses of Mademoiselle de Maran; but as to herself, what personal obligation could she have incurred toward me? Had she not expressed to me her profound indignation, when, upon one occasion, I had dared to offer her some jewelry?

"All this was perfectly true. By one of those inexplicable contrasts, so numerous in the character of Ursula, she would have blushed to receive a diamond; and yet she did not hesitate to do the honours of a house of which she knew I secretly supplied the enormous expenditure; and she did not hesitate, with a malignant joy, to throw me into the most extravagant, the most useless prodigalities.

"In short, when I had become desperately furious at seeing myself thus treated, and I reproached her with being my evil genius, Ursula laughed heartily; and replied, audaciously, 'I always told you to beware of me whenever I appeared to feel for you anything but indifference or disdain; for that I might, one day, take it into my head to avenge Matilda. Now, what I then predicted to you has occurred: I AVENGE MATILDA!'

"The next day, a tender word from her effaced the recollection of her disdain.

"In vain I strive to attribute my inconceivable conduct to one of those infatuations of which we have seen such numerous examples; in spite of myself, I believe that it has been so ordered by fate. I am becoming superstitious—I tell you that this woman is my fate!

"There is something melancholy even in her joy! something supernatural in her fascination!

"Mademoiselle de Maran sometimes says to me, 'I have never been attached to any one; no one has been able to govern me; and now, I cannot live without this woman. I know that she is as malicious as a devil, but that is no matter; it seems to me that the fire of her large blue eyes illuminates everything around me.' Mademoiselle de Maran is right; her eyes sparkle with an extraordinary brilliancy; one would say, that the light which shines through them proceeds from some internal fire. Well, I must conclude, for you are laughing at me, and accuse me of believing in the devil.

"Adieu: my head is in a blaze: this retrospect of past years has on me the effect of a powerful dream.

"What think you of all this? Answer me, counsel me, and pity me!

G. DE LANCRY."

CHAPTER V.

A MEETING.

WHEN I had finished reading this letter, I hardly know which had the greatest sway over my mind—indignation, or contempt and pity for M. de Lancry. If I had preserved any sentiments, either of regret for what had passed, or of hatred against my husband, I should either have been cruelly avenged, or bitterly afflicted.

I could not, at all events, suppress a bitter smile, when I thought of the sacrifices which my husband was continually making for a woman who treated him with contempt; while he had treated me with the utmost harshness, when I asked him to move the kennel of his hounds, and to allow me a small sum of money for a useful charity.

That, however, which struck me the most, in his letter, was the kind of fright and superstitious weakness, which were discoverable in all the latter lines. Bad dispositions—haughty spirits—are always wont to attribute their excesses, or their crimes, to some fatality—to some supernatural cause—rather than to the infirmity and perverseness of their own natures.

Moreover, this feature was worthy of especial observation. This man, so brilliant at all previous times—so insolently happy, in his own conceit—so scornful of the tears which he made others shed—so coldly selfish—so *blest* by his success with women — now showed himself, in the course of this amour, as humble, as much mocked, and as ridiculous, as the tutor in a farce! this very man—young, handsome, rich, and witty! In truth the punishment of Providence takes many forms, said I; what will it take with Ursula?

I could no longer entertain a doubt, but that M. de Lancry was rushing, headlong, into ruin. He now possessed only the price of the estates at Maran, which I had secretly bought in. That portion of our inheritance from M. de Mortagne, which had become our common property, was about likewise to be swallowed up. Indifferent as I had been, to all the considerations of mere money since the death of my child, I was yet cruelly wounded, when I thought that my property was thus nourishing the extravagance of Mademoiselle de Maran, and the mad caprices of my cousin.

Unluckily, my marriage contract had been so drawn up, that I could in nowise resist the absurd prodigality of my husband. My only procedure would have been, to sue out a bill of separation;—but for nothing in the world would I have carried matters to that extremity, or submitted to have my name mixed up with disclosures so revolting. I have always entertained a deep sense of modesty, in my grief; scarcely, in fact, had I confided mine to Madame de Richeville. How, then, could I bear to make the public the confidants of my misery! I submitted, therefore, to endure that which I could not alter. The moderation of all my tastes and habits, moreover, rendered this sacrifice less painful than it would otherwise have been to me.

The promises of Madame de Richeville, had, in no respect, misled me. Her cares, her friendship, and the good-natured attention of the persons whom I saw with her so often, went far to efface the last remaining traces of my old sadness. And in the end, I enjoyed a calm widely different from that of annihilation—a repose which was not lethargy; if it were not happiness, it was at least, the utter absence of all suffering.

This state of transition was to me full of charms. It seemed to resemble that state of sweet and pleasant torpor, or that vague and dreamlike sense which succeeds so often to dangerous maladies.

A single proof, due to the merest accident convinced me that my cure was perfect. Once, while I was driving in the carriage with Madame de Richeville, toward the *bois de Boulogne,* I saw two women, accompanied by several men, dart by us rapidly on horseback. They were Ursula and the Princess de Ksernika, the Duke de Versac, M. de Lancry, Lord C., and three others, with whose names I was not acquainted.

My cousin backed, with her customary grace and boldness, the little mare, Stella, which had belonged to us. Our carriage was going at a foot's pace. Ursula and my husband recognized me instantly, and my cousin, with rare effrontery, pointed out M. de Lancry to me, smiling insultingly as she did so. My husband turned very red, and pretended not to see me.

The cavalcade swept by. Madame de Richeville watched me closely. My heart throbbed painfully, but this impression rapidly passed away. As we drove back to Paris, we saw Ursula with the Princess de Ksernika, and the Duke de Versac, returning from the *bois de Boulogne* in a beautiful caleche with four horses. The servants wore the livery of Mademoiselle de Maran. M. de Lancry followed them in a tilbury. At this new trial, Madame de Richeville again looked at me, but I only smiled.

"Come," she said: "I believe, now, you are completely cured."

It was, as well as I remember, on a Tuesday. I had taken a box at the opera, for that evening, with Madame de Richeville; and she had offered seats to the Prince and Princess d'Hericourt. We had been there but a little while, when, by a singular chance Ursula and Mademoiselle de Maran came into a box on the same tier with ours. I had insisted that Madame de Richeville, in spite of her refusals, should place herself in front with the Princess d'Hericourt; so that, being hidden in the shadow, I could observe the following scene without being myself noticed.

My cousin, according to her wont, was dressed with the most perfect simplicity. She wore a white dress; a scarf of the thinnest gauze hung like a snowy mist over her lovely shoulders, which, in the blaze of light, looked as brilliant and as smooth as marble. Two cherry-coloured camelias were intwined gracefully in her suberb brown hair, which hung in tresses quite down to her bosom, whereon reposed another bunch of flowers, similar to those in her head-dress. Such was the whole of her attire. I have never, at any time, suffered myself to be blinded by jealousy. I thought Ursula prettier than ever. Her features, and, indeed, her whole air and expression had assumed a shadow of dignity, or I might even say of haughtiness, which seemed to compensate, in some degree, for the freedom of her glance, and the licence of her speech; for I am told, that with men, especially, she adopted, at times, a boldness of speech that was almost incredible.

Mademoiselle de Maran, who remained constant to her gray silk dress, to her plait of black hair, and her cap adorned with marigolds, was greatly changed, and grown very old. Her eyes alone appeared to me to have preserved all their serpent-like keenness, and gleamed fiercely from under their thick gray eyebrows.

During the interval of the acts, Mademoiselle de Maran's box was constantly filled with visitors of the very best and most elegant society in Paris. I saw Ursula, therefore, in the very fullest tide of her triumph and success. She had become—what she always boasted that she would be—the most fashionable woman in Paris. She had gained her ends; and for those ends, she indeed seemed to have been born. The fire of her eyes, the grace and animation of her gestures; her fresh and girlish tones of sweet laughter, her haughty air, altered at times to little flights of coquettish merriment—all showing a long habit of seeking to please, and to be remarked by men.

Among the men, who visited Ursula, I saw M. Gaston de Senneville, the very *pea-blossom* of the day, as Madame de Richeville, his aunt, called him. My cousin seemed to receive him with particular distinction; while another visitor, of graver character—I believe it was the *chargè d'affaires* from Saxony—was conversing with Mademoiselle de Maran.

Several times M. de Senneville took her opera-glass familiarly out of the hand of Ursula; spoke to her in a whisper, burst into fits of laughter at her speeches, leaned over her to look at persons whom she pointed out to him, and, in a word, affected that air of close intimacy, which young men are so fond of adopting toward fashionable women.

In her turn, my cousin doubled her coquettish graces; and wishing to let him smell the perfumes of the enormous bouquet which she carried in her hand, leaned back toward him, turning her beautiful figure half-round, while he seemed to inhale with ecstacy those charming odours. Although this unusual preference on the part of Ursula was not, strictly speaking, in good taste, I must admit that it would have been impossible for her to mix with the action more charms, or more seductive fascination.

By chance, almost at the same moment, I cast my eyes toward a box nearly opposite to that of Mademoiselle de Maran; and then I beheld, through the opened lattice, the pale and convulsed face of my husband. Standing in the gallery without, he was unquestionably watching Ursula, whose attitude and manner were singularly calculated to awaken his suspicion.

After a few moments, M. de Lancry disappeared, and came, in his turn, to make his bow to Mademoiselle de Maran. Being much younger than the Saxon *chargé*, M. de Senneville was obliged to give up his place to my husband, which he did, not without snatching some flowers from Ursula's bouquet, and adorning his button-hole with them, smiling triumphantly as he did so. M. de Lancry seemed to be in agony, as he exchanged a few words with Mademoiselle de Maran.

After the departure of M. de Senneville, Ursula had taken up her opera-glass abruptly, without saying one word to M. de Lancry, and continued to gaze steadfastly over the whole house. Twice my husband spoke to her; she pretended not to hear him, so that he was compelled to touch her arm gently, to draw her attention. She shook hands with him indifferently, answered without any interest, and began again to stare about her. M. de Lancry could not restrain a gesture of impatient anger, and then began to talk with Mademoiselle de Maran, and the Saxon *charge.*

In the morning, thanks to the rapidity with which Ursula had passed me, I had scarcely remarked M. de Lancry. But I now looked more attentively at his face, emaciated, harassed, bearing the deep imprint of the jealousies and sorrows, which his letter has described. He could do longer have been recognised, as in other days, for the light, brilliant man, who loved nothing—gay and brilliant, because he was strong in his confidence of pleasing. He was gloomy and restless, uneasy, yet submissive; because he now loved deeply, and found himself the butt of that raillery which he formerly used toward others.

When Ursula was tired of looking round the house, M. de Lancry again spoke to her, but this time with a sort of sad timidity. I knew so well the countenance of that woman, that I could read in her imperious bearing, and in the smile of mockery which curled the corners of her lips, something that told me she was answering with sarcastic wit, the indirect reproaches of my husband.

At length, M. de Versac entered the box; the curtain rose, and this scene, so painful to M. de Lancry, ceased with the first notes of the orchestra.

A violent sense of indignation passed through my heart, as I thought of the hideous despair to which M. de Secherin was yielding—insensible to the pious consolations of his mother, wearing his life away in solitude; while his wife, gay and happy, was abandoning herself to her taste for gallantry and pleasure.

These observations I made, if I may so express it, concealed in the dark background of the box; for Madame de Richeville and the Princess d'Hericourt, easily divining the nature of my thoughts, had conversed almost incessantly, in order that they might not interrupt me.

The prince had left the box, so that I could give myself up altogether to my gloomy reflections. This evening was, though painful, far indeed from being useless to me. It proved to me that I now entertained a sort of pity, mingled with disdain, toward M. de Lancry, which would have moved me, in the case of any stranger placed in a false and painful position.

By slow degrees, my thoughts resumed their tranquillity. The sufferings of M. de Lancry reminded me of what I had suffered. I returned thanks to Heaven, that it had relieved me from these terrible anxieties, even by drying up within me the very source of love—for I fancied that I could now find a guarantee for my future happiness, in my very certainty that I should never more feel that passion.

A few days after my arrival at Paris, M. de Rochegune had gone out of town to one of his estates, whither some business had called him. He returned in a short time after the meeting, I have described, with my cousin at the Italian opera.

The memory of M. de Rochegune had remained in my mind, intimately associated with that of M. de Mortagne. Deeply devoted to my interests, of a grave character, and noted for his enlightened philanthropy, he was in the habit of receiving so much general deference, that I had accustomed myself to regard him as a man of ripe years; for he possessed all the solid and fixed qualities of such a one.

In the very outbreak of my afflictions, while the fascination of my husband was yet strong upon me; thinking that it would never be in my power to marry M. de Rochegune, I had confessed to myself, almost with a sense of shame, that I could never have fallen in love with him—so little could his stern excellence bear away the palm from the seductive graces of M. de Lancry.

Madame de Richeville, when she spoke to me sometimes of M. de Rochegune, had told me that, from the time of his return from the Levant, he had gained by mingling with the world an air of steady firmness, in all respects befiting the independence and nobleness of his character; instead of the cold reserve which had formerly obscured half his good qualities. Impatient, therefore, to renew my acquaintance with M. de Rochegune, almost as much from curiosity as from grateful regard, I was delighted when I heard of his return to Paris.

One evening I went to Madame de Richeville's house, through a little glass gallery, which I had caused to be built, in order to communicate with her more readily.

I cannot explain why it is, but there are certainly some privileged drawing-rooms, of which the arrangement and proportions seem to invite chattiness and intimacy. That of Madame de Richeville, was one of this number. I have passed, therein, so many pleasant evenings, that I cannot resist the pleasure of drawing a slight sketch of it. The memory of beloved places adds volumes to the truth of our recollections.

An antechamber, adorned with fine old pictures, gave access to the drawing-room, in which Madame de Richeville sat continually. It was hung with green damask, a material admirably suited to the purpose; with the cornices, the casings of the doors, and the furniture carved in gilt wood-work, after the best style of Louis XIV.

In the chimney-corner was a large ottoman, which, on this evening, Madame de Richeville shared with the Prince d'Hericourt, a fine stately old man, with hair as white as snow, and an expression full of worth, serenity and calmness. On the other side of the fireplace sat the princess; her pale and sweet face, denoting at the same time dignity and mildness of character. She wore her own gray hair, curled under her cap with a sort of aged coquetry—if I may so express it; and as she conversed with Madame de Semur, she looked from time to time toward her husband, with a glance of tender, satisfied affection. The sight of these two old persons, who had passed, side by side, firmly and nobly through the most disastrous times, supported by their mutual affection, and touching now upon the end of their career—with heads erect, smiles on their lips, and thoughts turned to Heaven—has ever seemed to me extremely touching.

Madame de Semur, sitting near the princess, presented in her person a striking contrast to the aged lady. She was a woman of scarce forty years; the expression of whose features, noble at once and lively, seemed as it were an enigma. She had the most strongly marked air of the world, combined with the keenest vivacity—the most brilliant and ready wit. To conclude the picture, Emma was sitting, at her tapestry work, near a tea-table placed between the windows.

The whole scene must be lighted up, to convey a true impression, with several lamps of old Chinese porcelain; the bright rays of which, partially dimmed by shades, brought out in *chiar oscuro*, the gilding of the white wood-work, the rich frames of the pictures, the bronze ornaments of the furniture, the paintings on the large *Sevres* vases, and the gay colours of the flowers which they contained. The merry fire-light must be poured in dancing gleams over the soft purple carpets—the whole atmosphere of the warm and comfortable drawing-room must be perfumed slightly by the fragrance of *Essence de Bouquet*—an English odour, of which Madame de Richeville was passionately fond, and which to this hour I can never smell, without the memories of those long-gone days starting up instantly before me:—for, at all times, certain perfumes and certain melodies, have a strange power of quickening my recollections. With all these accessories, a clear idea may be formed of that delightful asylum, consecrated ever to the prolonged and pleasant conversation of friendship the most intimate and well chosen.

CHAPTER VI.

THE NARRATIVE.

When I entered the drawing-room I have described, Emma rose to offer me what she called my *seat*—it was a little low arm-chair, which the dear child had observed that I preferred. I kissed her forehead, as if to thank her for this act of forethought, and respectfully pressed the hand of the Prince d'Hericourt.

"What a pity it is you have come in so late, my dear Matilda," said Madame de Richeville; "the prince has been relating to us the chivalric deeds of one of our friends, which has interested us very deeply."

"Whose deeds were they?" said I.

"M. de Rochegune's," replied Madame de Semur; "he is an absolute Cid. He deserves an especial place in the modern library of romance."

"Well! well!" said the prince, smiling good-naturedly, "at the risk of passing for an old gossip, I will tell the story of my Cid over again, for Madame de Lancry. I am sure she will be pleased with it."

"I shall also," replied Madame de Semur. "Just now I was affected in spite of myself; but this time I will be on my guard and make fun of your hero, for there is nothing in the world so disagreeable as to have to admire one person so much."

"Do you hear her?" said Madame de Richeville, laughing: "and in a moment she will deny that she dotes on paradox."

"That is very plain, I am sure," answered Madame de Semur; "when we come to ourselves from these fits of enthusiasm, we feel just like citizens' wives, coming back from court. So, prince, pray begin your story of this fine action, that I may be able to laugh at it at my leisure."

"I unite," said I, "with Madame de Semur, in praying you to repeat this story—very sure that this complaisance will cost you nothing. Men, famous for success with the ladies, always like, people say, to talk of deeds of gallantry."

"Oh! I understand you," returned the prince, smiling; "I understand you very well—you are paying me these pretty compliments to hinder me from saying what I think about you. But let me find a good chance, and I will be inexorable. You may flatter my self-love, as much as you please, but I will not spare your modesty. But now, as you wish it, I will repeat the story I was telling these ladies."

"You know, I presume," continued the prince, "that M. de Rochegune fought so gallantly in the cause of the Greeks, that he was appointed colonel of one of their three regiments of cavalry—which, however, he had raised and equipped at his own expense; and to which, with affecting memory of his old friendship, he has given the uniform of the regiment of hussars, to which M. de Mortagne belonged, under the empire. That uniform is, I believe, white and gold, with blue facings. If I dwell long upon these details, it is to prepare you for another proof of recollection, as affecting as this, united to a bearing so truly great and noble, that Madame de Semur, too, will be obliged to admire it, and that without regret."

"We shall see! we shall see! for I shall listen to you, prince, with all sorts of startling suspicions. I give you fair notice. We judge the pleader by the cause he advocates."

"Let me try, then, to gain mine," said the prince, laughing as he went on: "The independence of Greece acknowledged and confirmed, de Rochegune travelled into Russia, at the time when that power was engaged in war with the Circassians. Curious to witness these operations, and admirably well received by the emperor, he served one campaign as a spectator, or volunteer rather, in the Caucasus. Grievously wounded in a charge of cavalry, in which he had greatly distinguished himself, his horse was killed under him. Fainting from loss of blood, he was unable to extricate himself, and was left senseless on the field of battle. When he recovered his senses, it was a moment of terror;—he was alone, in the midst of a vast and wild steppe, which the moon scarcely lighted with her pale rays. The snow was falling slowly, and he was himself almost buried under its frozen masses, when he revived from his swoon."

"It was indeed horrible!" said Madame de Richeville; "that desert, covered with snow, had the effect upon his mind of an enormous winding-sheet. M. de Rochegune told me that such was his first awakening thought;—for he told me the manner of his wound, although he concealed from me all that followed of this romantic adventure."

"I believe that well," said the princess; "it is too creditable to him, that he should think of relating it."

"I only learned it, myself, yesterday," said the prince, "from an aid-de-camp of the emperor, who served in that campaign with M. de Rochegune; and from him it is that I learned all the particulars. Our friend was alone, at night, in the wildest solitude, paralyzed by cold and the pain of his wounds, almost without strength to cast aside the snow which was gradually covering him. Suddenly, he heard the dull trampling of a troop of horse. He knew not whether they were friends or foes; but, preferring death to so terrible a position, he called, as loudly as he could, to some scattered horsemen of the vanguard, who were fortunately passing near him. They heard him—drew near—and he was saved. These horse belonged to a body of Don Cossacks, whom the movements of the war had placed for the moment in the rear guard of the army. These irregular Cossacks, as wild as the steeds which carried them, implicitly obeyed the old hetman who led them. Rochegune was led to the chief of the horde, who took him up behind him, on his horse, after he had temporarily dressed his wounds. This hetman, as the aid-de-camp informed me, was a sort of patriarchal warrior, whose countenance and carriage were both worthy of the heroes of antiquity. Rochegune owed him his life. From that day forth he contracted a friendship for him, as though they had been brothers in arms. He left the staff of the army, in which he would have endured fewer privations, and followed thenceforth the adventurous and painful life of the hetman's cavalry, who served as the skirmishers and forlorn hope of the army; who never slept under tents, but on the bare ground, and sometimes on the snow itself. This is not all, however; they run the more danger, that they, like the Tartars against whom they are fighting, neither give nor take quarter—massacring, without mercy, old men, women, and children."

"Pardon, prince, if I interrupt you," said Madame de Semur, smiling;

"but I was sure, that in listening to the gallant deeds of your protegé the second time over, I should find something less worthy of my admiration. Just think one moment: for the love of adventure, he allies himself to a band of robbers and cut-throats; and, from gratitude, remains a witness of their atrocities."

The prince laughed, and replied, "It is precisely, madam, by means of these atrocities which M. de Rochegune witnessed, that I expect to arouse your sympathies in his behalf."

"How can that be?"

"It is, I admit, something wonderful."

"Come, prince, go on with your story; for we know no more about it than Madame de Lancry, since it was just here that you broke off before."

The prince continued: "M. de Rochegune, perfectly determined never to leave the hetman, until such a time as he should be able to repay him by a service equal to that which he had received, was not obliged to wait long for an opportunity. I forgot to say that the hetman had two sons, who served as privates in his troop, whom he loved as a wolf loves its whelps; whom he plunged, without a thought, into the wildest perils, and whom—the action ended—he clasped to his bosom with some such show of tenderness as would beseem a wild beast. The natural intrepidity of de Rochegune, and the affection of the hetman, whose perils and privations he shared to the utmost, gained him great influence over the savage hordes. A *reconnoisance* of outposts, composed of a few horse, among whom were the hetman's sons, fell into an ambuscade, posted on the bank of a torrent; almost all the Cossacks were massacred, and the waters bore down to the hetman's camp those of the bodies that were not shattered against the rocks."

"Ah! that is horrible!" cried Madame de Semur: "one would suppose it a page from some modern romance—the first attempt of some young girl, blushing at her own ———"

"Listen to the conclusion," said the prince. "When he heard of this calamity, the old hetman remained astounded—almost insensible. At this moment, an aid-de-camp of the field-marshal—the officer of whom I have spoken to you—came up with orders to the hetman, to move, with his cavalry, upon a point which he designated. The old hetman replied mechanically, with a mere motion of his hand; but, full of confidence in the old soldier, and in haste to carry other orders, the aid-de-camp never dreamed that it would be necessary to look to the execution of the manœuvre just ordered. He gallopped off to another post. De Rochegune, though young, thoroughly understands the art of war. Perceiving the importance of the movement, which should have been executed with the speed of lightning, he was astonished at the immoveable aspect of the hetman. He spoke to him—reminded him of the orders he had received—but could not elicit one word from him. Every moment of delay compromised the safety of the army, and endangered the life of the hetman—for his neglect of orders deserved death. To waken him from the stupor into which he had fallen, on hearing of his sons' massacre, de Rochegune took a bold step: he cried to the hetman—'*To horse! to horse!*' The old man shook his head without answering. '*It is to the rescue of your sons!*' exclaimed our friend. A gleam shot from the old man's eye: 'My sons!' he cried, 'where are they?' 'Follow me; you shall see them,' returned de Rochegune, springing upon his horse, and leading toward the point designated by the aid-de-camp. 'My sons! my sons!' shouted the aged chief, mounting and putting his horse to its speed to overtake de Rochegune, who was outstripping him. The Cossacks hastily follow on their chief's track—the mass of cavalry wavers, but de Rochegune leads and directs it, the old hetman at his heels, exclaiming still, *My sons! my sons!*' De Rochegune replied, '*Follow! follow me!*' The enemy's lines are in view—'*Thy sons are there!* cried de Rochegune, pointing the hostile ranks out to the hetman. The old man uttered a wild cry of fury, and burst upon the enemy. It was a frightful hand-to-hand encounter; but once in the middle of the fire, the old warrior regained all his composure. De Rochegune kept near him in the fight—told him, in two words, what had happened. The old man, once himself again, fought with his wonted bravery. By a strange chance, while charging a mass of the Circassian horsemen, who were retreating slowly, de Rochegune broke them, and forced them to abandon a baggage-horse, on which were two fettered prisoners———"

"The sons of the old hetman," exclaimed Madame de Richeville; "Heaven! what a happy chance!"

"Exactly so, madam," replied the prince; "they were riddled with wounds—the enemy had spared them only, of all who had fallen within the ambuscade, and was keeping them as hostages. You can imagine de Rochegune's joy, as he led the sons to their father. He, at the sight, folded his arms upon his breast, bent his knee to the earth, and kissed de Rochegune's hand. To understand the full signification of that act of homage, you must know that it is to an emperor, only, the chief of the hordes pay the like; and, moreover, among barbarous tribes, it is a thing unheard of for an old man to kneel to a young one."

"'*I saved your life!*'—said the old man—'*you have preserved my honour!—I therefore ought to save your life again to be quits with you. But in addition to this, you have given me back my sons—how shall I ever repay you that obligation?*' The following are the very words of our friend, as the aid-de-camp related them to me, who had been sent to compliment the hetman, on the brilliant charge of his Cossacks—'Thou, and thy sons,' replied de Rochegune, 'swear to me to spare henceforth, for ever, all women, children, and old men, who may fall into your hands—saying to them—live, in the name of————'" but here the prince broke off abruptly.

"In the name of whom?" we all cried at once.

The prince smiled, as he answered, "That is not my secret. It is enough to know that the hetman and his children took that oath—and kept it. The name which de Rochegune had pronounced to them was so far from being forgotten by the horde—as the Russian officer told me, who served to the end of that campaign—that even last year, when the war was ended, it was as sacred to the hetman, as the oath which our gallant and generous countryman imposed upon him."

"This is, indeed, worthy," said Madame de Semur, "of the high days of chivalry—and to complete the romance—the name is doubtless, that of some proud beauty, who—"

"Permit me to interrupt you," said the prince, with a serious air, in order to assure you that this name deserved—and ever will deserve, to be pronounced with as much interest as respect. I surrender our knight errant to your raillery—but I must sue for mercy in behalf of this mysterious name, which you know———"

"Which I know?" exclaimed Madame de Semur.

"Yes, madam; and which you have spoken twenty times; for it is that of a person whom you love—in a word, it is a name admirably suited in all respects to be the symbol of a generous action, and de Rochegune could not have paid a worthier homage to her who bears it."

"Ah! prince, this is very cruel of you," said Madame de Richeville; "come, tell us."

"It is impossible, madam. Yourself even, will approve of my silence, when you shall hear it. I would not rob de Rochegune of the pleasure of telling it to you in person."

"But before that time comes, we shall die of curiosity," said Madame de Semur—"come, prince, let yourself be coaxed to our side. To determine you, I will admit that I think the conduct of M. de Rochegune, admirable. His method of recalling the hetman to his senses by the exclamation—'Follow me—I know where are your sons'—could have been conceived only by a noble spirit, itself capable of feeling with how loud a voice deep affections can at times speak to the human heart."

"And his idea of availing himself of the gratitude which he had aroused, to force the claims of mercy upon those barbarians," said the Princess d'Hericourt—"was not this fine?"

"Very fine, and very noble," the prince answered; "and it will appear, if not finer, at least more touching, when you shall know the name——"

"Ah! prince, how cruel you are!" said Madame de Semur; "we admire it enough without this excitment of suspense; can nothing move you?"

"Hold! madam," said the prince, "I hear a carriage entering the courtyard; perhaps chance sends to my assistance the hero of my tale—apply to him."

"Blessed be luck! if it is, indeed, M. de Rochegune," cried Madame de Semur; "for it goes so constantly amiss, that, for once, at least, it ought ——"

At these words, her speech was cut short by the entrance of M. de Rochegune himself. The suns of the Levant had so bronzed his face, and the expression of his features was so much altered, that I should not have recognized him. The dark hue of his complexion made his large gray eyes seem to shoot a more dazzling spark from under his black eyebrows. His face, shaved close, with the exception of a pair of dark mustaches, which relieved the bright red of his lips, and the perfect whiteness of his teeth, gave him a marked eastern aspect. His strongly-marked features could not, however, have been easily forgotten. His tall and well-proportioned figure; his dark garments; the air of chivalry and worth with which he bore, erect and haughty, his sun-burned brow; and his dark mustaches, gave him the air of one of the proud and valiant cavaliers painted by Van Dyck or Velasquez. His firm bearing had no resemblance to the impudence of braggarts, but seemed to tell of a calm, bold character, at once intelligent and energetical; while, in the curl of his lips—slightly curved—it might be seen that bitter sarcasm could, sometimes replace the generous kindness of his smile.

Delighted by the return of M. de Rochegune, I told him all my feelings, very frankly, and he seemed to partake in them; but, suddenly, while we were talking of the past, a shade of grief passed over his bold features. I easily conjectured that a thought of M. de Mortagne had crossed him; but he considered that neither the time, nor the place, were suited to the mention of that cherished friend.

"Do you know," said Madame Richeville to him, "that you are, at least, a very finished dissembler?"

"How so, duchess?"

"Certainly you are. You told me how you were wounded—how near you were to perishing in the snow; how you were saved—but there you stopped—you never told me a word of a certain old hetman."

"Never a word of the inestimable service you rendered him in the preservation of his honour," said Madame de Semur.

"In restoring his two sons to him," added the princess.

"And in making him, and his two sons, swear never again to murder women, children, or old people," said Madame de Semur; "but to set them at liberty, in the name of——"

"Now comes the mystery," said Madame de Richeville; "this cruel prince will not tell us, in whose name you succeeded in softening the ferocity of those barbarians."

All these reproaches had followed, one so quickly on the others, that M. de Rochegune had not been able to reply. But, when he did so, without affecting any awkward, false modesty, he said, plainly and frankly—

"All that is quite true. But allow me, prince, to ask you, how you heard of it?"

"Do not tell him, until he has divulged to us the mysterious name," cried Madame de Richeville.

"See how he blushes," added Madame de Semur.

M. de Rochegune did indeed blush deeply: but instead of defending himself, he avowed it.

"Yes:" he said, smiling, "Ido blush, because I cannot hinder myself from blushing with gratitude, when I hear that name mentioned, which has always brought me bliss; which has been my guide — my protector — and my counsellor, in all the gravest circumstances of my life. Since I first pronounced that name, it has become to me a talisman: I worship it with the blindest idolatry. This morning, even, they tell me that I made a good speech in the Chamber of Peers. Well! it is because I mentally invoked that name. I was sure of it."

"But," said Madame de Richeville, "yet the more earnestly, on account of all these miracles, are we dying to hear this name."

"What you have now said," added Madame de Semur, "renders us but the more impatient."

"Will you speak!" cried Madame de Richeville. "First of all, we shall torment ourselves to death, until this mystery is cleared up. And then the prince has told us, that we knew, all of us, the owner of the name—that we loved her. Come now, tell us, or we shall lose our wits."

"I should be deeply grieved, indeed, madam," said M. de Rochegune, "that you should imagine me afraid to speak, and even repeat that name. The sentiment which dictated it, is too honourable, that I should not boast myself of it—always—everywhere—and aloud! But I am sure the prince thinks with me at this moment, I must not gratify your curiosity. If he is against me, I give up."

"I should have been glad if you had given me leave to speak," said the prince, smiling; "then I should have revenged myself on——"

"Ay! on whom?" cried Madame de Semur, gaily, as she saw that the prince hesitated.

"On you, madam," he answered, gaily, "by forcing you to admire, yet more, that which you only praised with regret. But I am high-minded. I agree with M. de Rochegune."

"Oh! this is frightful; you see they have a mutual understanding," said Madame de Richeville. "Well then, we must wait for your good pleasure; but you shall not get off so without gratifying our curiosity, de Rochegune. You must gratify it in a different manner."

"I am at your orders, madam."

"Well then, if you are at my orders, you shall make me, for a keepsake, a sketch of the old hetman, in Emma's album."

Emma, before even M. de Rochegune had replied, rose joyously from her seat, her cheeks kindling with a delicate blush, and drew near to a table on which lay all the materials for water-colour drawing.

"And to punish him for his discretion, he shall sing us his Albanian song of 'the swallows,'" added the princess.

"Emma will accompany him," said the duchess, "and Madame de Lancry will be charmed to hear him."

Emma went to open the piano with quick and joyful eagerness.

"Make haste, thou mysterious man," said Madame de Richeville; "let us make acquaintance with the face of your hetman, whom I love without knowing him."

"And sing us your song of 'the swallows,' which I love, because I do know it;" put in Madame de Richeville.

"With which shall he begin, dear princess?" asked Madame de Richeville.

"With the song—because we hear it, long after he has ceased to sing: so does its simple and affecting melody ring through the depths of the heart."

Emma sat down to the piano; and M. de Rochegune began to sing—it was an Albanian air, which he had noted down himself, and the words of which he had translated;—nothing can be imagined sweeter or more plaintive than that wild lay. I had never before heard M. de Rochegune's voice: it was at once powerful and thrilling.

The song pleased me so much, that I asked him to sing it over again. Without waiting to be pressed, he did so, with the best grace in the world—Emma accompanied him marvellously well.

The first part of his task so successfully accomplished, M. de Rochegune now applied himself to the second; and, in half an hour, had produced a masterly sketch in Sepia, of the hetman of the Cossacks, whose rude face was enhanced by a dress singularly picturesque.

I was, however, less astonished by the remarkable talents of M. de Rochegune—although I knew not before that he possessed them—than by the graceful ease with which he accommodated himself to the wishes of the company.

I thought it at once most agreeable and most strange, that this intrepid soldier, this eloquent orator, this evangelical Christian—for he most religiously adhered to his philantrophical institutions on his estate—should have found time to unite accomplishments so pleasing, to qualities so rare and eminent.

It has always seemed to me, moreover, that the world is greatly indebted to men, who, mighty in their intelligence, and strong in their valour, condescend to make themselves simply and generally amiable.

I was not, moreover, the only one who felt thus; for, although M. de Rochegune constantly and ineffectually endeavoured to bring other persons into notice; it was clear, from a thousand trivial shades, from a thousand nothings, that he was valued by the world for his superiority, just in proportion as he strove to make every one forget it.

I shall always remember that evening, so pleasantly passed in converse on the arts, on poetry, on journeys, and so soon ended—thanks to the familiarity of that intercourse, which substituted plain good humour to ambition, and a desire of pleasing, to vain-glorious rivalry.

While Madame de Richeville was wishing the Princess d'Hericourt good evening, M. de Rochegune asked me, if I was ever at home in the morning, and if I would do him the favour of admitting him.

"Although the favour, which you ask at my hands, is so truly trifling, I have a great mind to insist on a condition before granting it. I am much more obstinate than Madame de Richeville; and should be very sorry to wait until to-morrow, before hearing the mysterious name, to honour which you perform deeds so noble."

"And I, madam, could not tell it, even in the presence of your best friends; not on account of them—for they, I doubt not, would have applauded me; but on account of you."

"Of me! and wherefore?"

"Because," replied M. de Rochegune, speaking with the most natural air in the world, and as if he had been talking of the simplest matter—"Because that name was yours—because that name was MATILDA."

CHAPTER VII.

AN OLD FRIEND.

STILL under the influence of the disclosures which M. de Rochegune had made me so suddenly, I returned to my own house, uneasy and annoyed;—feeling as if he had made me an abrupt declaration of his love.

My embarrassment was not caused by the whims of a false prudishness, but by the dread of seeing my future intercourse with M. de Rochegune stripped of its loyal and fraternal character. Instead of giving me pleasure, under such circumstances, it would have been formal and annoying to me; from the cold air of reserve which it would have forced him to assume.

Nevertheless, after some reflection, I reassured myself, as I recalled to mind the words of the venerable Prince d'Hericourt. Well knowing the reference to me, he had concealed my name, from respect to my modesty; but, at the same time, he had praised so openly M. de Rochegune's conduct in the matter, and he, too, had spoken with so much ease and frankness, that my scruples were ere long appeased.

Moreover I could not bring myself to believe that M. de Rochegune would treat me lightly;—our relations had, more than once, assumed a character of extreme delicacy, and never had such an idea struck me. He had rendered me two very important services. First, in the early days of my marriage; when he came to inform me of the infamous calumnies which M. Lugarto was circulating, at my expense, and endeavouring to accredit by his public attentions to me: secondly, in aiding M. de Mortagne to rescue me from the infamous stratagem, by which that base man had lured me into danger.

On both these occasions, M. de Rochegune had borne himself with the most delicate reserve. Never had he so much as alluded to the hope he once entertained, of winning my heart, or of the sentiments which he had felt for me.

A short time after the fatal night spent in the house of M. Lugarto, he had set out for Greece; and after that, for Russia. During the murderous campaign in which he was engaged, he had maintained a sort of worship of my name—of my memory—scarce knowing whether he should ever again behold me. Could I, then, be offended at this proof of his attachment—fantastical as it was, and, at the same time, high and noble?

It was with the greater ease, too, that I forgave M. de Rochegune this love—of which I had, for an instant only, suspected him—because I believed myself incapable of any tender sentiment toward him. I had, of late, discovered his possession of most agreeable accomplishments. I was sincerely grateful for all the services which he had rendered me: but still I could not but feel the enormous difference between the affectionate friendship I bore him, and the love I had formerly experienced for M. de Lancry.

Accustomed, as I was, ever to analyze my most transient impressions, I asked myself if it was not painful to me, at twenty years of age, to renounce all thought of loving—not more from the solidity of my feelings, than from the impotence of my dead heart. But on the contrary, I thought I could discover, in that cold impuisance, the guaranties of my future happiness.

Since my return to Paris, I had been completely happy. The limited and choice society, in which I found myself placed, loaded me with attentions, and with kindness. I had Madame de Richeville, I had Emma, whom to love. I had, therefore, in these, sufficient occupation for my heart, that I should not regret the absence of such lively sentiments.

I have forgot to say that, remaining at home as I did every morning, I was often in the habit of receiving Madame de Richeville's friends, who had recently become mine also; so that the admission of M. de Rochegune was not an accidental circumstance.

I waited for him impatiently; but he did not come until a day had intervened from that on which I saw him for the first time after his return. I was alone when he came; he put out his hand and said, very sadly—"I was unable to talk with you, the day before yesterday, of our unfortunate friend, although we were in the house of one of those persons, who loved him the best in the world. But you must have perceived, as I did, that it was no time to speak of that sad event. Ah! if you only knew what I have lost in him!"

And a tear, which he did not offer to conceal, rolled down his cheek as he spoke.

"I, too, have lamented—still lament him—Oh! how bitterly!" replied I, painfully moved, "when I think that, even dying, his last thought was of me! Alas! it was a frightful death—a fearful vengeance!"

M. de Rochegune knit his brow sternly as he answered, and that gloomily, "I have employed all means, in vain, to learn where was that wretch, Lugarto, at the time; and to find out the instruments of his cowardly assassination. For, like Madame de Richeville, I too am convinced on the subject of this duel, and its frightful issue. No one here has been able to give me any information on the matter. I have heard merely, that he was somewhere in America, or the Brazils."

I then told M. de Rochegune of the strange incident, which had put me in possession of Monsieur de Lancry's letters to some unknown personage.

The fact seemed to strike him; and he said, that he would take measures to discover, if possible, whether Lugarto was now actually in Paris.

"But do you think that he would ever dare to return to Paris?"

"I fear it. He is too cowardly to fight me; and I confess, that I should shrink from the performance of the terrible threat which M. de Mortagne made him."

"He would have shrunk from such an extremity himself," said I.

"I do not know—he had a character of iron. But what will increase Lugarto's audacity is, that there is no proof of his crimes. He might throw himself on the protection of the law, and defy you to the scandal of bringing an action againt him for abduction."

"Never would I consent to it," cried I: "it would be necessary to awaken too many questions too disgraceful to the name I bear. This sad past is now as a painful dream to me—all that it recalls to my mind alarms me."

"You are right. Leave to us the care of watching over you—forget the past. Oh! we shall soon be able to chase its recollections from you by our cares, our affection. Mortagne has left you as a legacy to Madame de Richeville, to me, to all those, in a word, who have souls capable of generous feeling. We will try to be to you what he was while upon earth—to prove to you, that there are yet some good hearts in the world. Poor lady! you have so sadly suffered—you have met so few beings but the base and sordid, that you can hardly wish for more, I fancy, than to believe us, and to let us love you—is it not so, indeed?"

I cannot express the frank and affecting cordiality with which M. de Rochegune uttered these last words.

"How good you are," replied I; "how much gratitude do I not already owe you! Have you not ever executed the promises which you made to M. de Montagne? do you not remember, some three years ago?"

"Oh! do not talk, I entreat you, of what you owe to me; for do not I owe to you many sweet and delightful thoughts?"

I could not hinder a slight expression of embarrassment from appearing in my features. M. de Rochegune perceived it, and said to me with a serious smile—

"Hold! an illustration will make my meaning plain to you. I should be hurt, if you were to take this for gallantry. You love good pictures, do you not? beautiful statues and fine music?"

"Certainly."

"You can understand persons passing whole hours in the contemplation of the *Transfiguration*, the *Penseroso*, or the *Virgin and her Child?*"

"Undoubtedly."

"You comprehend how we can listen with rapture, nay, with gratitude, to Mozart, Gluck, or Beethoven? You must confess, in short, must you not, that we may reasonably ask the most divine enjoyments, the highest inspirations, from the master-pieces of the arts?"

"Yes; but what is all this to the purpose?"

"Well: as for me, I have asked all this divine enjoyment, all this high inspiration, from an adorable master-piece of nature's handiwork from an ideal creation of benevolence, of grace and of nobleness. I asked and obtained them. The last wish of my father, the desire of M. de Mortagne, my respectful sympathy with your sorrows, have all contributed to increase the devoted worship which I have consecrated to you. You have become, as it were, an intermediate being between humanity and divinity. Ever since I have known you, it is to you that I ascribe all my best instincts; for it is from you that they come. The blending of your name, of your memory, with a few generous actions was not intended as a flattery, offered, but a debt paid to you."

"You have, however, other recollections besides that to inspire you," said I, hoping to change the tone of this conversation, which was beginning to embarrass me; "the admirable man, who brought you up to sentiments so noble."

"My father?—he had foreseen, early, what you would be. He had hoped that we should one day be united," answered M. de Rochegune, gravely. "To think of him, is to think of you. His memory, august and holy, shields the attachment which I feel for you. Therefore, be reassured—above all, think not that I am uttering *words of gallantry* to you—that I am dreaming of what people vulgarly call *making love to you. Making* love to you, is what no one does to women such as you. As soon as we know such women, we *do* love them—love them as they ought to be loved—that is what I have done for you."

"Monsieur de Rochegune ——"

"This confession ought not to affront you—ought not even to surprise you——"

"But yet——"

"Hear me. As soon as you shall know what I would be to you—what I would that you should be to me, you will thank me for my confession."

"Indeed, monsieur, I——" I answered, unable to help smiling at his vivacity.

"And it may be, even, that you will be happy at it."

"Happy?"

"And proud, also."

"Proud too? How charming! I will listen to you."

"Nothing is plainer. You are a brave, high-minded woman, as jealous of your honour as a man is of his own. You are incapable of going astray, not more from the rooted strength of your principles, than from the fact, that to sin, in you, would, like a cowardly reprisal, be some faint excuse for your husband's baseness. Is not this true?"

"It is true. I have never, for a moment, thought differently."

"You see, then, that in part, at least, I partake the elevation of your sentiments—I understand, because I do partake them. But you are scarcely twenty years old; you have a solitary life—without a family, before you, without ties or kindred. For the present, Madame de Richeville suffices you. You are in a state of transition; you mistake the cessation of suffering for happiness. This negative state of existence cannot last; your heart will awaken—you will again love!"

Here I interrupted M. de Rochegune. "Thus far," I said, "you have spoken with too much truth and reason, to suffer me to seem to argue with your last words. I shall never love again—one fatal passion has killed the power of loving in my heart."

"Killed the power of loving in your heart!" he exclaimed "why, you have never loved at all!"

"What! I never loved?"

"Never!"

"Come, M. de Rochegune, let us talk seriously, or we shall get into the paradoxical nonsense of Madame de Semur."

"I am talking quite seriously. I repeat to you, that you have never loved."

"But, monsieur——"

"But, madam. Providence never could intend that it should be in the power of the first mere chance-comer, to awaken or extinguish—and that, too, for ever—in such a heart as yours, the most divine—the most eternal of our sentiments; that which demands the employment of the rarest and most sublime faculties of the soul!"

I looked at M. de Rochegune in astonishment, and replied—"What do you mean? How! have I never loved?—how, or whence, came that wretched sinking of my heart—that death of all my hopes?

"You have mistaken the paralysis of grief for the death of the heart—can the heart die?—can we renounce all hope, at the very moment when we have nothing to regret?"

"Nothing to regret, monsieur?"

"No! you have much to deplore, but, happily, nothing to regret. Thus is the future out-spread before you, without the limits of a visible horizon!"

"The future!"

"Surely the future—wherefore not? What closes it against you? If you should tell me that a passion, noble, and grand, and deep, and repaid nobly, may leave eternal regrets in the soul, and shut out hope for ever, if broken off abrubtly by some divine event—then I will believe you. Yes! such regrets may be eternal, because their source is pure—eternal, because, instead of struggling to smother them, we piously and affectionately cherish them—eternal, because we find in them that bitter pleasure, which springs from lost happiness, because that very happiness is gone and irrecoverable. But does this pious constancy to past recollections, prove that love is indeed dead in the heart? Far from it. It proves that it never burned therein more purely—more ardently. Tell me, then, have you felt aught like this? No! surely not! You, who have undergone sufferings so frightful, you have fled with a sense of terror from the recollections of those sufferings; you have thanked God, that he has delivered you from your executioner—unhappy woman that you are!"

"True! it is true! Far from delighting myself with these fatal recollections, I ever shunned them. But however fatal—however shamefully misplaced my love may have been, I tell you that I *did* love—otherwise never would I have married M. de Lancry!"

"Good Heaven! but are there not surprises of the heart, even as there are surprises of the senses? The attractive exterior of your husband, his soft and hypocritic words, your natural desire to escape the guardianship of your aunt, your ingenious confidence, in a man whom you believed loyal and sincere, your native generosity, the total impossibility of your forming any comparisons—all drove you into a marriage unworthy of yourself. Once married—once unworthy—you mistook your blind obedience to your husband's power, your brave observance of your duties, for the noble devotedness of love. You were virtuous and resigned—you believed yourself passionately enamoured!"

"But have I not endured the tortures of jealousy!"

"Everything seems to mislead you. Starting at first on a false principle, you have deceived yourself with regard to jealousy, as you have with regard to love."

"Deceived myself, say you?"

"It was the ingratitude of your husband, rather than his infidelity, that awoke your anger."

"Why should I not have loved M. de Lancry?"

"Because he was unworthy of you."

"Do you think, then, that we can never love but those who are worthy of us."

"I think that you, Matilda de Maran, could never love—really love—but one who is worthy of you."

"Look, then, at M. Secherin; he is as worthy as his wife is base. She has betrayed him shamefully; still he adores her"

"I am not talking of M. Secherin. I do not generalize; I particularize. I say that you, *you* could not really love any but a man worthy of you."

"But why should this be true of me—of *me*, rather than any other!"

"Because with you, as with the saints in heaven, love—I repeat it—must be a sublime interchange of the noblest sentiments."

"Your arguments are specious; and you bring my vanity to aid you in the argument," said I to M. de Rochegune: "still I am not convinced."

"You will be so."

"But wherefore would you force on me this conviction—that my heart was taken unawares; that I have never yet loved: and that I must yet love some worthy of me?"

"I would force it upon you, to lead you to be happy and proud too, in the confession I make to you. I have said it."

"Explain yourself."

"When I prove to you, that you *have never*, that you *could never* love any one but a man worthy of you; I bring you, necessarily, to the confession, that you will one day love."

"I cannot confess that. What tells you, in the first place, that I shall ever find a man worthy of me?—and, after that, what tells you, if I do, that I shall love him?"

"Every thing tells me so. It is one of the natural consequences of your osition. But your character, your principles, are such, that when you do ve, it will be necessary for you not merely to dare avow that love boldly to the world, but to be proud of it likewise."

"Such love as that is rare——"

"And men worthy to awaken it, yet rarer. I tell you, therefore, that whenever you shall meet one of these men, you will necessarily love him. The emptiness of your heart, the pride of being so loved, the mysterious influences which bring together kindred souls——"

"But tell me of the man."

"The man, if you choose it, shall be myself."

"You?"

"Even so. I say this, because I think myself worthy of you"

"Coming from any other than you," I replied, gravely, to M. de Rochegune, extending my hand to him, "this avowal would be the very height of madness; but you—I can trust *you*—and you are right: I am happy and proud at your avowal."

"I told you that you would be so," he answered, with incredible simplicity.

"I will imitate your frankness," I replied to M. de Rochegune: "it is possible that my heart may awaken. If I ever should entertain for you such sentiments as you describe—such sentiments of love as both you and I might be proud of—I promise you, I will give myself up to it with happiness—with security. But, alas! can the holiest, the purest love, be safe from the calumnies of the world?"

"I will not set myself up as the world's champion, but I believe that the greater part of the wrongs it commits are chargeable, either on the weakness or the falsehood of those who complain of it. They who have sore consciences, lack courage; they on the other hand, who entertain feelings of which they are proud, which they dare proclaim in the face of all, why should they seek to hide them? To do so is to commit a baseness—to deserve calumny. Having nothing with which to reproach ourselves, why have recourse to deception or concealment, which ever accompany misconduct? Why, in a word, should not virtue have its sphere of audacity, as well as vice? Why should a woman such as you, and a man such as I, for instance, hesitate to display openly, before society, our pure and virtuous love, as much as Ursula and your husband displayed their adulterous passion? The world admires boldness and resolution. Well, then, let the virtuous be as bold and resolute as the corrupt. Their courage equal, the world will prefer the virtuous. I will avouch it!"

I was delighted with the expression of noble arrogance that animated the features of M. de Rochegune.

"You are right!" I exclaimed, carried away in my own despite by the flow of his generous thoughts; "it would be glorious to bring down calumny to the admission of its own impotence, by overstepping, openly, the terms which its covert malignity would hardly dare apply."

After a moment or two spent in reflection, I again addressed M. de Rochegune.

"I am going to give you a proof of my frankness and my confidence, by asking you a strange question: Why did you not speak to me thus three years since?"

"Because, three years ago, I was too young, and wanted confidence in myself too much, to dare to speak to you so. Mortagne was aware of my love. He strongly counselled me to quit France—to travel—to ennoble my life, by devoting it to some noble cause, until I should have acquired sufficient power over myself to *separate the gold from the dross*, as he said—so to purify that love that I might come and offer it to you without a blush."

"And if, on your arrival, you had found me resigned to the desertion of my husband, and loving worthily a heart worthy of my own."

"Elevated and disinterested sentiments, are liable to be tried by severe misunderstandings, most painful to self-love. Under such circumstances. I should have told you what I tell you now—offered you that which I now offer

—and that, too, before the person whom you loved; for, being loved by you, he would have been capable of comprehending me."

"And if I had loved a man unworthy of me?"

"That could not be; there are moral, even as well as there are physical impossibilities. I repeat it to you, you could never love in such a way that you would have to blush for it."

"But if this impossibility had happened, obstinate man that you are?"

After gazing at me steadily for a minute, in perfect silence, M. de Rochegune said to me, with a solemn expression, which gave great weight to his words.

"I SHOULD HAVE DOUBTED MYSELF!"

Such was the singular first conversation that I held in private with M. de Rochegune.

CHAPTER VIII.

CONFIDENCES.

It was a good while before I was sensible of the counter current, if I may so speak, to my conversation with M. de Rochegune. He had so much sincerity and frankness in his manner, that I brought into my intercourse with him, none of that reserve with which his confession might otherwise have inspired me.

I continued to see him every evening, at the house of Madame de Richeville, which he still regularly frequented, with the other friends of the duchess. I also frequently saw him in the morning.

I had so much confidence in him and in myself, that I abandoned myself, without fear or restraint, to the pleasure of this growing affection. I did not attempt to conceal it. I was proud—yes, I believe it—actually proud of the marks of attachment which M. de Rochegune manifested for me, and of the noble influence which, ignorant of it myself, I had exerted on his life.

I enjoyed the success which daily added to his reputation. He seldom spoke in the House of Peers, but his eloquence had an electric force on every noble soul. The influence of his words was greater, because he was wholly independent. He belonged to no party—or, rather, he belonged to all, in whatever element they had of great or noble. An avowed partizan of everything just, humane, elevated, truly patriotic — he was pitiless toward all cowardice, selfishness and hypocrisy. Attached to no leader, he had made himself an anomalous position—barren of all advantage to himself—wonderfully fruitful in the sublime truths which he spread abroad, through all France, all Europe.

So far indeed had the renown of his name, and his exalted character, extended, that one of the northern sovereigns, who had resisted all the representations of French diplomacy, touching some concession which was claimed from him, caused a letter to be transmitted to M. de Rochegune, informing him that, although personally unacquainted with him, he felt much pleasure in yielding to the consideration of his name, and the services he had rendered to humanity, that point which he had hitherto refused.

It seems to me, that there was quite as much of high-minded esteem as of excellent benevolence in the monarch, who, never having entertained any relations with M. de Rochegune, (himself a stranger to the question at issue) and knowing his disinterested avoidance of public office, nevertheless found the means of making him play a part so important in the affairs of his country—thus granting to the sole influence of his character the most important concessions.

Never shall I forget the joy of M. de Rochegune, when he came to give me these affecting tidings; nor the touching manner in which he sought to persuade me, that, deriving from me all his noblest inspirations, it was to me alone that this distinguished favour, of which he was so justly proud, was owing.

Although entirely unexpected, the favour charmed the friends of M. de Rochegune much more than it surprised them. His enlightened philantrophy, his oratorical talent, the service he had seen, his varied and deep erudition, all conspired to render him a very eminent person.

Almost all strangers of distinction, whether of rank or learning, esteemed it a great privilege to be admitted to Madame de Richeville's circle; and it is easy to imagine that the duchess's friends were a little inclined to make a lion of M. de Rochegune, who had contrived to awaken sympathies so high and flattering.

Nevertheless, once intimately known, no one possessed in so high a degree, as he did, the art of throwing into shade his universally admitted superiority, by means of a charming simplicity, a sweet and attractive graciousness of manner.

His preference for me—and, why should I not mention it?—my preference for him--for the affection which existed between us had nothing that should make me blush—seemed so natural, and were so openly avowed in Madame de Richeville's circle, that every one would have scrupled, if I may so express myself, to deprive M. de Rochegune of the pleasure of sitting next to me, or offering me his arm; and this good-natured toleration on the part of persons of known strictness, proved to the satisfaction of all present, that our attachment was purely honourable.

I had the warmest friendship for Madame de Richeville, and she daily loaded me with fresh proofs of regard. I loved Emma, as I should have loved a younger sister Never in my life was I so happy.

I passed almost every evening with Madame de Richeville, except on the days when I had my box at the comic opera; and on some others, when I staid at home to indulge in quiet meditation.

In the morning, I walked out, paid visits to my intimate friends, or practised at the piano forte. And so much did I enjoy the absolute tranquillity of this new mode of life, that I several times refused to go to balls to which I was invited.

An incident, such as perhaps never occurred elsewhere in society, displayed, in a new light, M. de Rochegune's character, eccentric as it was already. To understand what I am about to relate, it is necessary to know—what I very naturally omitted to state before—that M. Gaston de Senneville, Madame de Richeville's nephew, had paid me great attention; thinking, that the evident marks M. de Rochegune gave of his affections toward me, and the scarcely slighter marks of affection which I gave him, proved that there was only a fraternal regard existing between us, which left him every prospect of success in inspiring me with a tenderer feeling.

He was very young; not, I believe, above twenty. Madame de Richeville always received him very kindly; though, indeed, he was but a type of nonentity combined with elegance—of utter insignificance with perfect grace. Having, moreover, excellent manners, he supplied the want of intelligence by such precocious knowledge of the world, that his exquisitely studied airs made almost an absurd contrast to his pretty and almost childish face.

After infant phenomenons, and little girls, who play the great lady—I know nothing more lamentable than young men who, instead of the gaiety and unquestionable boldness natural to their years, affect to possess a serious demeanour, and a profound disdain of all that is frank, lively, and entertaining. Certainly, however, I must admit that this exaggerated ceremoniousness is more tolerable, than the careless and almost coarse familiarity, so much adopted by many men in good society; so that it was only in our strictest intimacy, that Madame de Richeville and I laughed at the staid and formal inanity of her nephew.

I had received him with so much the more familiarity, that I believed him wholly free from all pretension; nor had he ever paid me any attention, beyond that homage, which every well-bred man ought to offer to every lady. But in our days, good manners are becoming so rare, and men affect to pay so little respect to women, that the smallest signs of interest, are now almost thought to compromise us;—so that, what only passed for a proper sense of consideration in the small circle of Madame de Richeville, would certainly have passed for very marked and particular attentions, in larger and more mixed societies.

It required the occurrence of the scene I am about to mention, to enlighten me as to the designs which were attributed to M. de Senneville, or which he attributed to himself, without my having the least suspicion of them.

One morning, Madame de Richeville came into my room, and, after kissing me, exclaimed—

"You see me here, almost mad with joy You have become, on a sudden, an inconceivable heroine. You are loved—you are admired, beyond the powers of imagination! you are about to be repaid for all that you have suffered. What if I were to say, the world has become good—that it does you justice? I have actually become an optimist."

Madame de Richeville seemed so much excited, that I began to laugh at her: "Explain," said I to her—"explain how, without knowing anything about it, I should have become so incredibly, so inconceivably a heroine."

"I will tell you the whole; and make you blush—oh! blush to the full extent of your powers of blushing, for praise has not been spared you. But the most delightful thing of the whole is, that it was a folly of my nephew, Gaston de Senneville, which inspired M. de Rochegune with the most eloquent words—and—but I will tell you the whole. You know that last night, by accident, I shut my doors, and went to Madame de Longpré's Thursday evening. I could not avoid it. It was an age since I had been there. Our good prince and princess had been reproaching themselves on the same score, and I had agreed with them, the day before yesterday, to carry them to her house. Well; last night we all three went to Madame de Longpré's. She is a woman, whose character I cannot pretend to admire; with all her intellect she lacks courage, and would allow the most intimate of those whom she calls her most intimate friends, to be abominably torn to pieces in her presence, without taking further notice than to say, '*Ah! Heavens! do you! you tell me so? I never could have believed that! Can it be true? Oh! I think that must be exaggerated!*' The Prince d'Hericourt now goes out so little into the world, that his arrival at Madame de Longpré's was looked upon quite as an event. You cannot imagine, my dear Matilda, the imposing effect produced by his presence, and how suddenly it altered the whole tone of the party, even at the moment of our entrance. When we came in, the conversation was so loud and noisy that it was hardly possible to hear the announcement, but when the Prince d'Hericourt's name was heard, all the men, and even some of the younger women, rose to him."

"I am of your opinion," said I to Madame de Richeville, "with regard to such homage paid to a man, now perhaps somewhat shorn of his past splendour, who has, in spite of this, raised to its highest dignity, one of the noblest names of all France. Such things do reconcile us to the world."

"Do they not?—wait, however, till I have done, and you will be yet more astonished. I need not tell you that Madame de Longpré receives all Paris. Her house is indeed curious, because you meet in it all the celebrities (real or assumed) of all opinions, and of all societies. After the arrival of the prince and his wife, Madame de Longpré,—who, it must be admitted, does the honours of her house admirably—instead of encouraging, as she generally does, a spirit of slander and ill-nature, elevated the conversation to a tone suitable to that of her new guests. A few moments afterward, M. de Rochegune arrived. His speech of the day before yesterday in the Chamber of Peers, had excited much attention. All eyes were turned upon him. The prince offered him his hand and received him with that gracious cordiality, which, coming from him, may be looked upon as a precious distinction. Other persons came in, and among them my dear nephew, Gaston de Senneville, with a superlative *tie*, and a sublime bouquet in his button-hole; introducing himself with an air of agonizing ease, and studied grace, which always make *you* laugh——"

"And give *you* the horrors!"

"Of course, they do. I am a very good relation, and they are enough to drive one to desperation. There was then a great crowd of people at Madame de Longpré's—I must tell you who they were—you will soon know why. First, there were Madame de Ksernika and her savage of a husband; that delighted me—again, you will soon know why! Then, there was the Austrian ambassadress, and that also delighted me, for another reason; because there is nothing delicate or elevated that ever escapes her notice. There was also—he came in at the same time with us—that great statesman, of whom M. de Talleyrand said so happily—'*He is imposing, in his own repose!*'"

"Impossible to describe him better," answered I; "but are you not also delighted by the picture which the Prince d'Hericourt drew of him the other day?—*As if in direct contrast to all other men, he has the rare power of making himself beloved by his masculine firmness, respected by his exquisite grace, attractive by his most serious qualifications, and popular from his high birth.*'"

"I think this picture likewise extremely striking" said Madame de Richeville, "though still far from the original; for it is as difficult to give all the shades of a noble character, as all the expressions of a fine face. What more shall I say? All the *élite* of Paris were assembled at Madame de Longpré's, and I was delighted to see all the great world witnesses of the scene which I am about to relate to you."

"Go on, then, for I am dying of impatience."

Madame de Richeville resumed her narrative. "M. de Rochegune was conversing near the chimney-piece, with Madame de Longpré. People were talking about the last concert at the *conservatoire*, at which we two were together; and some one asked me if you were a good musician. 'Certainly, she is,' I replied; 'and it is very unlucky for Madame de Lancry's friends that her timidity is insurmountable, which deprives them of the pleasure of hearing her; for she has an excellent method and perfect taste.' 'The first time I ever heard Madame de Lancry speak,' said M. de Rochegune, 'I was sure that she must sing admirably. The tones of her voice are so musical, that singing is not an acquired art, but rather a sort of language natural to her.' Madame de Ksernika, who has, of course, never forgiven you for the wrong which she once meant to do you, smiled with a malicious glance, and said, in a soft, sweet voice to M. de Rochegune, unquestionably wishing to put him out of countenance—'You are a great admirer of Madame de Lancry, are you not?' 'Yes, madam; but perhaps I love her even more tenderly, than I admire her highly;' in a voice so firm, and with a tone so frank, so respectful, and so full of feeling, that, notwithstanding its singularity, this public avowal appeared the most natural thing in the world."

"No one can be more perfectly convinced than I am, of M. de Rochegune's sincerity," said I to Madame de Richeville, blushing as I spoke; "or that before you and your friends his attachment to me is frankly admitted—to that I do not object—but before persons whose good-will, to say the least of it, is questionable——"

"You are unjust, my dear Matilda," she interrupted me; "the end of my story will prove that our friend acted quite wisely. Madame de Ksernika repeated the word, *tenderly*, laying a peculiar stress on it, so as to be heard clearly, and said to M. de Rochegune affectedly, and evidently wishing to be ill natured—'That is extremely indiscreet of you—do you know?—it is a sort of declaration that might very easily come back to Madame de Lancry's ears.' 'Well, madam; and do you imagine that I have not, long ago, myself declared to Madame de Lancry that I love her passionately?' Madame de Ksernika assumed an expression of surprise—of startled timidity; dropped her eyes, with an affectation of injured modesty; raised them, dropped them again more modestly than before; and at last said—'I am in despair, monsieur, that I should, by a joke, have elicited an answer which may have fearful consequences to Madame de Lancry's reputation; and——' M. de Rochegune did not suffer her to continue her speech, but said to her very simply, 'And why, madam, should the reputation of Madame de Lancry suffer by what I have said? Ought one not to be proud of the admirarion, and the love, which he feels for her? Ought one not to glory in the power of being sensible of all that is best and noblest? Ought one to dissemble his enthusiasm, because it is a young and charming woman, who is the possessor of a soul so high and magnanimous?' 'Certainly not monsieur,' replied Madame de Ksernika, with her spiteful smile, except that this enthusiasm might lead ill-natured persons to suppose, that the lady who inspires it is not insensible'—'That is exactly what I desire—that ill-natured people, above all others, should be the first convinced that Madame de Lancry is by no means insensible of the enthusiasm with which she inspires me,' answered M. de Rochegune, with a glance of severe disdain. 'Ill-natured people, truly! If, by accident, madam, you should know any of them, do me the kindness to inform them, that Madame de Lancry perfectly well knows the sincere love with which she has inspired me; that she feels the strongest attachment to me; that I see her every day, and that I know no happiness comparable to that arising from this delicious intimacy.' M. de Rochegune, by thus firmly and undauntedly justifying a sort of intimacy, which the insinuations of Madame de Ksernika would have left in a sort of suspicious twilight, completely overthrew the mischievous machinery of this bad woman. Quite disconcerted, she now called to her aid my nephew, Gaston de Senneville, who, it appears, has declared himself your adorer, and left it to be understood that you received his adoration kindly."

"Good Heaven! M. de Senneville never uttered a single word that could lead me to suspect such a thing!—and I—why, I never——"

"Good God! my dear child, I know it perfectly," said Madame de Richeville, interrupting me, "and you are about to see how my nephew was punished for his insolence. The frank speech of M. de Rochegune had already rendered him very ill at ease, as you may imagine. He turned quite red; and Madame de Ksernika, looking at him with an air of mockery, said, 'Well, M. de Senneville, what do you think of the discretion of these ideas of M. de Rochegune?' My unfortunate nephew does not shine brilliantly in impromptu speaking; he was obliged, however, to say something, or to pass for a fool. You will see that he did not gain much by breaking silence. He replied, then, to Madame de Ksernika, in a pedantic tone: 'I think, madam, that M. de Rochegune lays very little stress on mystery in love matters, and I cannot agree with him. There is something so charming in that soft obscurity which——in that tender twilight which we——we——' and there he stopped; it was impossible for Gaston to get any farther. His voice faltered, every eye was fixed upon him, he stammered—coughed; M. de Rochegune took compassion on him, and answered him, at first, with a sort of almost paternal affability, though he afterward grew something warmer with his subject: 'I assure you, my dear M. de Senneville, that I know all the value of shadows and mystery—as, for example, to a questionable style of beauty, to a base treachery, or to a false and lying love! But, do you see, when it concerns lovliness, as pure and dazzling as that of a fine antique statue, just kindled into life by the first sunbeams—I mean that for Madame de Lancry'—he added parenthetically, with a sneering smile at Madame de Ksernika—'when it concerns a sentiment, which gives both happiness and honourable pride to those who share it—I mean that for my own love—then there can be no sun too dazzling, no sky too brilliant, no voice too sonorous, no adoration too far echoed, to bring such beauty and such love into light and fame. Then, when I compare enjoyments, tasted with a proud conscience, with a brow erect, and an unwavering eye; to pleasures snatched in darkness, amid shame and apprehension; I ask *myself*, Who has ever yet compared the eagle to the owl, the soldier to the cut-throat; honour to infamy, things avowed boldly to things concealed basely; words spoken boldly to thoughts smothered fearfully? and I ask *you*, madam, if, at this moment, I must not feel a thousand times more happy, at being able to pronounce aloud the name of the woman I love, than I should, were I forced either to falter it forth with blushes or profane it with unblushing impudence.'"

"Never," continued Madame de Richeville, becoming more and more excited—"never, my dear Matilda, could you imagine the expression which animated the fine features of de Rochegune, as he spoke thus. The fire of his glance, the puissant energy, the high authority of every gesture—his accents deep, and passionate, and thrilling—his attitude, at the same time, so calm and so imperious. How shall I make you comprehend it? The impression which he produced was electrical—all those who were spectators of the scene, Gaston, Madame de Ksernika herself, partook of M. de Rochegune's chivalry, during one of those moments so rare and so fleeting, in which all souls, strung to one chord of generous elevation, respond nobly to a burst of noble eloquence. But this was not all; for, as the first sensation was beginning to subside, the Prince d'Hericourt, as if to give a consumating touch to the words of M. de Rochegune—the Prince d'Hericourt, whose voice, you know, bears such authority with it, in all questions of principle or honour, cried out, taking M. de Rochegune's hand in both his own:—'Well done, my friend, well done. Let it be, if but for once, proclaimed in the world's face, that there are loves, so elevated and so honourable, that those who entertain them may take upright people for their confidants. Be sure that society will admit this love of yours as loyally, and on as pure a footing, as you have set it forth. It is for you alone, and for a young lady—whose name I pronounce ever with the respectful interest it merits—to revive, in our days, one of holy and high affections which raise noble souls even to the sphere of heroism.' 'You speak but the truth, my husband,' added the venerable Princess d'Hericourt. 'This poor young lady, who has undergone wrongs so cruel, will then, at least, know, that if the world was powerless to shield her from those frightful sufferings, it has given her credit at least for the courage and the pious resignation she has displayed; and that it testifies its sympathy, by sanctioning the consolations which she derives from a sentiment, deemed more than honourable by persons of the strictest principles.' 'Let us hope, also, that what is here spoken,' said the prince, in a voice full of grave authority, 'will find an echo far and near; that these words will reach those even, who fancy that society has neither the power nor the energy to chastise the base excesses of which human justice takes no cognizance. For once, at least—and oh! may the example produce fruit hereafter—for once, at least, let the public voice blight a vile man, and punish his unworthy deeds, by decreeing against him, as it were, a moral divorce. Let this voice cry aloud to the noble but unhappy wife of that man. To him, who has steeped you to the very lips in injury and insults—to him, who has abandoned you but to debase himself by a life of the most insolent and open degradation—to him, madam, you owe nothing! nothing except the duty of preserving his name spotless; and this only, because that name is henceforth your own. Your heart is almost broken, hapless lady! after long years of suffering and tears, you have found consolation in an attachment as delicate as it is devoted. Neither God nor man can blame you for this. The sentiment is upright, pure, and noble; the world applauds it—calumny even spares it! 'Once more, my friend, honour and glory unto you!' added the prince, again pressing the hand of M. de Rochegune in his own. 'Henceforth, at least, hearts rendered wretched, owing to their separation by man's laws, will be permitted to seek happiness in a feeling at which they will not have to blush. To them will your example be as a lantern and a shield. If the world should believe them, they will quote your name, and calumny will hide her head.' "

"Good heavens!" I replied to Madame de Richeville, wiping the tears from my eyes, for I was deeply agitated, "how much I regret that these words were spoken about me, so that I must not say how admirable I conceive this language."

"And yet, my dear Matilda, I but give you poorly the effect of it—sure am I, that I weaken it in my repetition. And then how can I describe to you the countenance of the prince—the noble passion which reddened even his brow beneath his locks of snow, as he stigmatized the vile conduct of your husband; or the ineffable sweetness of expression, with which he spoke of you. Once more, my child, I must give up all hope of conveying to you a true image of this scene, for you know that the prince and princess are respected almost as the personifications of honour, of high birth, of dignity, and even of religion. Conceive then, if you can, the imposing weight of such a scene, witnessed by all the *élite* of Paris—and then blame, if you have the courage, M. de Rochegune for his indiscretion!"

"I cannot," I replied; "for to that very indiscretion do I owe one of the sweetest moments of my life."

"Do you not," she replied; do you not? I was sure you would say so!"

"If it had not been you, who are telling me these things, my dearest friend, I should have had much difficulty in believing what I hear—so far does this scene appear removed from our manners, from the customs of our day."

"But, at the same time, Matilda, do you think that the prince, and princess, that M. de Rochegune, have much in common with our day? I will not speak of you, my dearest child, for you would chide me; but do you think that many men are to be met now-a-days, of loyalty so clearly proven, that they should place you higher, if I may so speak, in the scale of public estimation, by an avowal which, from the mouth of any other, would have destroyed your reputation? The *chivalric* weight of this man's character is such, and the confidence which he inspires so great, that persons who represent all that society has of the most eminent and most exalted, consecrate his love for a woman who is not his wife—so clearly does it comprehend the sublimity of that love! Ah! Matilda! Matilda!" said Madame de Richeville, in accents of kindness, mingled with remorse, which touched me to the soul; "never have I more clearly felt the difference between yourself and me!—never have I more bitterly regretted the sins which I have committed!"

"How can you dare to say so?" I exclaimed. "Is it your object to mix some taint of bitterness with these praises, of which I am so little worthy? What have I done, in the name of Heaven! to entitle me to this sympathy, which I owe solely to your constant and protecting friendship? Have you not brought into play every talent of your inventive wit, to give value to my sole good quality—negative as it is at best—my quality of self-submission? Good Heavens! is it then so difficult to suffer? Have I even struggled?—have I even proved my love by one trait of devotion? No! I think, indeed, that I should have done so; but opportunity has been wanting. I have never shown myself to possess one of those energetic characters, which sacrifice themselves boldly to sublime calamities—which hesitate not between their own happiness, and that of beings who deserve the interest and sympathy of the feeling and the virtuous. No! no! I have but loved with the tame submission of the slave—loved a man all unworthy of me—and hence, my sufferings have lost all claim to majesty. Do not compare me to yourself, who have so valiantly reconquered the position which you had lost. Against what fascination have I striven? Even this love, of which I am proud—I confess it—what has it cost me to excite it?—Nothing! I had but to suffer myself passively to be loved. It is no false modesty of mine, that gives me these convictions; but I assure you, my best friend, that I have yet to comprehend the passion with which I have inspired M. de Rochegune. Assuredly, I feel noble instincts within my bosom; but it is not these recent feelings which M. de Rochegune loves. In a word, dearest friend, others may set high value on the delicacy, on the purity of his love; but this very delicacy—this very purity—they cost me nothing. I have not even to contend against warmer sentiments. If I compare the feelings I now entertain toward M. de Rochegune, with those I formerly entertained toward M. de Lancry—both before my marriage, and during the brief blessed days that followed it—how wondrous is the contrast. At the bottom of all my feelings, then, how happy they might be soever, there was always something of embarrassment, of disquiet. With M. de Rochegune, my attachment partakes of this in nothing. When he is with me, I enjoy a pleasure, but at the same time a serenity, that is inexpressible. Instead of quickening its pulsations, my heart seems to beat more calmly than in its wonted mood. The presence, the conversation, the declarations, even, of that valued friend, agitate me not. My soul expands, as it always does, with admiration of all that is good and noble; at reading a fine book, in looking at a noble sight, at hearing of a heroic action."

Madame de Richeville looked at me, at first, in astonishment; then shook her head slowly, and smiled sadly.

"All I desire, Matilda, is that this calm may last. I know you well; and even if your principles were not what they are, your love is now placed so high before the face of men, that you would die rather than lose, much more, profane it."

"If I must tell you all," I answered with a blush, "I am sometimes even frightened that I do not possess more romantic warmth, more enthusiasm for M. de Rochegune, though no one values more than I his exalted qualities. It is said, that the most strong and lively love, is not that which springs up suddenly, like the ephemeral plants, which burst the bud, grow up, and die in a single day; but that which, inch by inch, shoots its invisible roots into the depths of the heart—that which grows silently, while we the least suspect it, because its growth is imperceptible. Well, it is therefore, that I sometimes fear my calm attachment toward M. de Rochegune, lest it should hide the seeds of a stronger passion, at whose increasing warmth I may soon have to shudder. Then, my best friend, if that should be the case, and I resist its encroachments—then, if I triumph, I shall be worthy of your praises—of that homage, which the world is disposed to accord to me. But now, virtue is all too easy to me, that I should pride myself on being virtuous"

CHAPTER IX.

CORRESPONDENCE.

Some few days after the conversation which I have just related, I received the two following letters, written by M. de Lancry, to the same mysterious person, of whom I have spoken.

They came to me in the same secret manner as before, and were again accompanied by a bunch of the poisonous scarlet flowers, which I looked upon as a souvenir of M. Lugarto.

M. de Lancry to * * *

Paris, May, 1834.

"Everything at once overwhelms me. It is enough to drive me mad with shame and fury. Now, then, the world has taken it into its head to become moral, and to put me under the ban of certain prudish and straight-laced coteries.

"I should have set utterly at nought all such absurdly virtuous philippics, had they not, as it would seem, in some degree reacted on this woman, who appears to have been born for my misfortune; and whom, nevertheless, I cannot prevent myself from loving more madly now than ever. When you shall read this in your heath-clad solitudes, you will ask yourself, I am sure, if we have fallen back again on the times of Amadis and Galaor.

"I do not know whether you ever met, of old, a Marquis de Rochegune—

an exceedingly eccentric person; very rich, as philanthropical as his father was before him; extravagantly romantic—wandering about everywhere to seek for wars, like a true knight-errant; brave, and moreover, not destitute of talent, and speaking in the Chamber of Peers, to-day against his friends—to-morrow in favour of his enemies—if friend or enemy clash with his principles. Beyond this, a man, utterly inelegant, knowing neither how to enjoy, or make the most of his fortune—for he has about three hundred thousand livres income, and hardly spends sixty—as they tell me. It is asserted, that he spends vast sums in charity—but in the greatest secrecy. As to his countenance, it is decidedly marked, but harsh and disagreeable. Nevertheless, women are so odd, that in Italy, Spain, and even in Paris, he has had so many adventures, that he might boast as much success, at least, in lighter matters, as in the graver style, of which he is ambitious.

"After a journey of two or three years, he came back this winter to Paris. His features are blackened incredibly by the suns of the Levant; and this charming peculiarity, added to thick brown mustaches, to something haughty in his air, something harsh and abrupt in his manners, gives him the appearance of an Italian bravo. But with its usual absurdity, the world—always gaping after something new—has taken up as its idol, this philosophic-Quixote, this lawyer-soldier, this miser-millionaire, and at this moment swears by him only.

"If you inquire of me—why I lay myself out so carefully on this picture? I reply, simply, because M. de Rochegune is my *wife's lover.* Do not think this a barefaced assertion? when I speak thus, I only echo the voices of the most upright and even religious people, who have taken this exquisite and affecting love, under their most especial patronage! Yes! they have proclaimed Madame de Lancry free from all claims of mine; subjecting to this one condition only, this little private divorce, that she shall preserve my name spotless from reproach. This reservation made, she is then authorized perfectly to enjoy, in peace and in broad day, all the chaste pleasures of a platonic love with M. de Rochegune: on the ground that I am a vile wretch, who have deserted my wife, to live in open and barefaced effrontery with my mistress.

"Who do you suppose it is that has thus played the part of *public prosecutor*, in behalf of my *outraged consort*, before the bar of good society? Who, but the old Prince d'Hericourt, the pure and honourable man, the great lord, *par excellence.* You will admit that he plays a very strange part in this; the rather, that his moral indictment was produced by a new act of eccentricity of M. de Rochegune, who, one fine day, thought it delightful to declare aloud, before all Paris, how passionately he loved my wife, and how perfectly she responded to his love!—in all virtue and honour—be it understood.

"Thereupon, the old prince and princess (the latter an angelic devotee, you must know,) began to cry bravo! and to congratulate de Rochegune on his frankness. In short, such was the enthusiasm, or fantastic absurdity of the scene rather, that a lady, a great friend of mine, confessed to me, while making great fun of herself for it—that for a moment she could not herself avoid yielding to the general feeling of intoxication.

"You well know, that in Paris, fashion is everything. Now, therefore, the only rage is what is called the chivalric loyalty of M. de Rochegune. The women are all going mad for him—the men are either jealous, or afraid of him. Madame de Lancry is quoted everywhere as a model of virtuous love; and, for the present half-hour, platonic affection and its innocent consolations are alone in vogue.

"In spite of all this platonic love, I am sometimes very much tempted to look upon M. de Rochegune as the greatest roué in existence. Nothing could be more convenient than this new method of conducting an intrigue. One could attach himself to a woman, the most openly, and the most virtuously in the world, and laugh under the shelter of this safe and chaste mantle, at blockheads and good souls!

"Yet—no! no! I am sure of my wife; and she is either strangely altered, or my name has always remained spotless. On his side, too, de Rochegune is sufficiently eccentric to find something exciting in this ethereal love, the immaterial nature of which will last—as long as it can!

"Once more, I should scoff at all this, if the harsh and affectedly precise words of old Prince d'Hericourt had not produced evil consequences to myself. I cannot deny it, he is a sort of oracle, very much thought of and listened to. He has denounced, what he has called, the baseness of my conduct to my wife, and said that society ought to avenge Madame de Lancry's wrongs by showing me the cold shoulder. Unfortunately, these words have found an echo. Rivals who envied me, fools with whose self-love I have interfered, young women whom I have slighted, ugly women whom I have scorned—all seized with avidity this charming proposal of the prince's, and, within a few days I perceive that I am received in the world with stern silence—and icy politeness—a thousand times more cutting than impertinence, because I can neither inquire into its cause, nor resent it.

"If Prince d'Hericourt were not an old man, I should have gone at once to the bottom of this miserable league, and challenged him; but it cannot be even thought of. It is true, Rochegune remains open to me; twenty times I have been tempted to fight him, but I am afraid of ridicule—people might fancy that jealousy was the cause of the duel. Yet I should dearly like to kill this man, for I detest him; he has always been the butt of my bitterest hatred; he was the friend of de Mortagne, who lives for me to hate no longer. Before my marriage I found him insufferably annoying, by his affectations of recent charities, and mysterious benefits; but at least he bore not that imperious air, that insolent attitude, which he now affects.

"The other day I met him: we were both on horseback. The blood mounted to my face: I hoped that he would not bow to me, and, perhaps, I should have been mad enough to pick a quarrel with him. Curses on it!—he did bow to me!—but his very bow was one of those nameless, formless, insults, which we feel to the very quick, but of which we cannot complain. I fancied that I could read on his hard impressive features, in his grave and piercing glance, that he bowed to me only as to the man whose name Madame de Lancry bore; or, perhaps, even to the husband of his mistress; for, in sooth, I am a precious fool, to believe in woman's virtue. But, no! I say no! again—sometimes, as if in spite of myself, I could wish to think her guilty. I fancy that I should breathe more easily—but I cannot reckon on her weakness permitting her to err. She lacks energy even to sin. She may weep—lament—but never revenge—never! Sometimes, when I reflect on it, I would rather believe in her virtue; although I have no love for her, it might be more painful than I imagine, to believe her guilty. It would be a wound to my self-love.

"What most annoys me—most irritates me now, is, to perceive that nobody considers this Rochegune ridiculous. In these circumstances, which give so much room for ridicule, twenty others in his place would have been hooted. What shall we say, then, of the world's wickedness, and spite?—or rather, what power must not this man have, who plays with fire, and succeeds where any but he would fail? How has he managed to revive again, if it be but for ten days, this feeble and worn-out dream of platonic love, fit only for children, school-girls, and old dotards? No! no! it is impossible that he can be playing this game sincerely.

"And yet, if it be the act of a roué, do you not think this man yet more astonishing? To choose for his dupes, for his accomplices and defenders, such people as the Prince d'Hericourt and his wife! Is not this admirable? This man is indeed, an enigma—but be he what he may, I hate him. Oh! I hate him unto death; and, above all, of late!—yet why, I know not. It is, as it were, a dark presentiment, that he will one day injure me—that he will wound me in the tenderest point! After all, wherefore should I write to you thus flightily? I write to get rid of my bile;—to blow off the up-surging bitterness of my soul! Well! since—directly or indirectly—this man has brought about the cold reception which the world now gives me, Ursula has become unmanageable. I do not know, whether it is that she feels humiliated, by the humiliations heaped upon me: I do not know whether it is that her self-love is wounded for me, or for herself; but she has dared to tell me, that I deserve this treatment by my odious conduct to my wife. She has dared to tell me 'that society does well to brand me thus; and that it ought, yet oftener, to inflict that sort of punishment on vices, or on crimes, which set the laws of the land at defiance.'

"'But,' I exclaimed, astonished at her audacity, 'are not you attacked as I am? insulted as I am?'

"'And, do you hear me complain of it?' she answered me. 'The world is just; I chose—at whatever cost—(and oh, my God! at what a cost has it been!—to be a woman of the first fashion—to shine brightest in the world of Paris—to be the idol of its fêtes: all this I have been! The world believes, that it was from love of you, I took you from your wife: for that, the world thinks me odious. It is right! but did it know, that I never loved you, it would think me more odious far, and far more infamous—and again, the world would be in the right!'

"I ask you—is it not enough to make me kill her with my own hands? But she has so long inured me to her sullen fits—to her caprices, that I should not have paid much regard to her ill-temper, if, for some time past, it had not taken a new type of dull and obstinate silence.

"I do not dare confess, even to you, the follies of which I have been guilty, in the hope of drawing her out of the state of melancholy stupor into which she seems to have fallen. All has proved in vain. Now she refuses, even to come down into the drawing-room to Mademoiselle de Maran. She, who is strangely subject to the fascination of this woman, is as powerless as I, to divest her from it. Ursula receives her sometimes with indifference—sometimes with disdain. She passes whole days in her room, reading, or musing. Her maid, who is a creature of mine, tells me that her mistress is unquestionably under the influence of some deep sorrow—that sometimes she scarcely knows her for the woman she was—that she passes hours together walking athwart the room in strange agitation—then, that she seems overwhelmed with anguish, and buries her head in her hands.

"She is much changed too—she has lost that rosy colour, which rendered her complexion almost superhuman. She grows thin, losing that slight voluptuous roundness, which lent so many charms to her tall slender figure. Her eyes are sunken—for a month, I have not once seen on her lips that bold and mocking smile, at once so formidable and so fascinating.

"From what caprice I know not, she often chooses to remain in total darkness: at those times she will see no one. When I first discovered these signs of melancholy, to which I could assign no cause, I hoped that grief might perhaps soften the inflexibility of her character. So long as she was gay and happy, I lavished on her gold to the satisfaction of her wildest dreams; now, melancholy and heart-sick, I would have striven to console her by the treasures of delicate and passionate love—treasures, which I have been hoarding long, but which I dared not offer her, so did I dread her cutting raillery.

"I said to myself—Now is the moment, when I shall, perchance, sway her to my wishes, by the power of the deepest devotion. Yet—no! no!—still she escapes me. On my knees—on my knees before her—for this woman makes me weep like the veriest child—I cried; but I cried in vain!

"'Tell me, for pity's sake—what is it that afflicts you? Tell me, that I may hope somewhat to console you; and you shall see what unheard-of resources you will find in my heart. You have sometimes appeared surprised at the wonders I have wrought, to gratify your most extraordinary wishes—they then were nothing; in truth, nothing to the wonders of affection with which your confidence would inspire me, or the hope, even, that I could save you a moment's sorrow.'

"Oh! believe me, what I then said, weeping at the feet of this woman, I felt—I experienced what, until that moment, I had never so much as dreamed of—a sincere grief, a frightful sinking of the heart, caused merely by the sight of Ursula's sorrow. I was ignorant of the cause of her grief; but it was she who suffered, and therefore I suffered likewise—it was a continual outgushing, if I may so speak, of my spirit toward hers.

"I tell you that, this time, I was sincere. My prayers flowed from the bottom of my heart; my sobs came from my very soul; my tears were hot and scalding as the tears of utter despair. In spite of all, this woman remained dumb, indifferent, gloomy, as if she had neither heard nor heeded me.

"Has this strange woman, then, become mad, or idiotic? Can she not see how I love her? or does she not understand what it is to have won a heart on which she may reckon, and for ever? Does she not know how rare it is for any one to inspire a passion, such as I now feel consuming me? Does she not know, that how criminal soever my love for her may be, it is still a crime to cast that love to the winds? Does she not give one thought, then, to the future? Does she not think that one day, her youth, her beauty, will be but an empty recollection, and that she will then be but too happy to find this affection permanent, which she affects now to disdain?—this affection, which must be everlasting, because it has resisted her caprice, her ingratitude, her scorn? Ah! This becomes too terrible to bear. I grow mad—mad with rage, against myself and her! I cannot write further—fury and torture blind me!"

CHAPTER X.

CORRESPONDENCE.

M. DE LANCRY TO * * *

"PARIS,——

"As it was impossible for me yesterday to continue my letter, I have resumed it to day. To record the new events which have taken place, I hope to be able to arrange my thoughts as I write; for at present, my head is a chaos in which they boil without order or regularity.

"Let me recapitulate some facts and my own recollections. Yesterday, after having dropped my pen, I went to visit Ursula. I was informed that she was indisposed, and would receive none of her acquaintance. I presented myself three times, in order to gain admittance, but was repulsed, and found it impossible to enter the door of her apartments. I returned there this morning, when, to my great surprise, Mademoiselle de Maran told me, quite moved, (that woman moved!) that Ursula had that moment informed her that she was desirous of leaving the hotel de Maran, and of henceforth living alone. Without listening to her further observations, I ran to see Ursula, and her chamber-maid attempted to prevent me from entering her room; but I forced my way to her parlour, and found her, arranging some papers in her secretary.

"'Is this true?' I exclaimed in my amazement, without informing her to what I alluded.

"She looked at me in a melancholy and abstracted manner, and replied—

"'What do you want?'

"'Mademoiselle de Maran has informed me that you were about to leave this hotel—that is impossible!'

"She shrugged her shoulders, and without discontinuing the arrangement of her papers, said:—

"'It is possible, since it is so.'

"'It shall not be,' exclaimed I, in a passion; 'I forbid you; I will not permit it.'

"'You forbid me? It shall not be? And what right have you to speak in this manner?' she replied.

"'Whether my rights are legal or not, I have rights over you, and I will enforce them.'

"'How will you enforce them?'

"'I tell you, that I do not choose that you shall leave this house; and if you do, I will follow you wherever you go,' I exclaimed. 'Hear me, Ursula; do not drive me to desperation. I will explain to you, in two words, why you and myself cannot be separated. I have sacrificed for your sake my own wife. I am dishonoured in the world. You see, then, that it is impossible for us to part. Fate has bound us together for life. Whatever my destiny shall be, you must share it—you hear me, do you?' said I, gnashing my teeth in rage, for the imperturbable phlegm with which she listened to me lashed me into a phrenzy.

"She replied, glancing into my very heart, and audaciously meeting my gaze—

"'And I will tell you, in two words, why we shall have nothing to do with each other. No person in the world has any right to control me. I shall leave this house, whenever I please; and if you presume to follow me—although no proceeding could be more brutal—I will apply to those who have a right to protect me against your pursuit.'

"'You will apply to the authorities—to the police, doubtless,' said I, with a convulsive burst of laughter; and as I gazed about me in surprise, I saw upon the sofa a black satin domino. A flash of jealousy now passed through my mind. I remembered that the carnival was the day preceeding, and showing the domino to her, I said, 'Ha! last night you went to the opera ball, in spite of your assumed illness—in spite of your affected melancholy.'

"'Yes, I did go to the opera ball last night, in spite of my assumed illness—in spite of my affected melancholy,' she replied; 'and that will prove to you, I hope, that my desire to go there must have been very strong.'

"'I see, I understand the whole of it,' I exclaimed; 'you are in love with some one; you have an intrigue upon your hands—a lover; but, by hell! the man you wish to join shall not escape alive from my hands. And, to commence, I will remain here—I will not move from this place,' I exclaimed, taking a seat upon the sofa.

"'Make yourself entirely at home, sir,' said she to me; and apparently unconscious of my presence, she continued her operations.

"Her coolness, indifference, impudence, exasperated me beyond measure. I tore from her hands the papers, and threw them into the middle of the room.

"She looked at me with undisturbed sang froid, shrugged her shoulders, and moved toward the door. I seized her arm rudely:

"'You shall not go out,' I said; 'you shall not move, until you tell me why you went to the ball last night, without intimating your intention to me —for there is no disguising your sickness; you are pale, and much changed in your appearance. Unhappy woman!' I exclaimed, unable to hide my emotion and tears at the sight of her emaciated face, 'what imperious motive could draw you to that ball?—answer me.'

"Without saying a word, she gently disengaged herself from my grasp; and as I stood before her to prevent her exit, she quietly seated herself in an arm-chair, and leaning her elbow upon its arms, rested her chin upon her hand, and remained immovable and silent. I knew her intractable disposition —mildness and entreaty could move her no more than threats and violence. The resolution which she had just taken was so sudden, it frustrated so entirely all my hopes, that I wished to make a final appeal, to soften her feelings. I addressed her in that language, which the most overmastering love —the most sincere devotion—the most hopeless despair, alone can suggest; prayers, tears, sobs, supplications, made no impression upon her marble heart. Wishing, at all events, to break her exasperating silence, I then went so far as to add insults and reproaches! but nothing—nothing could draw from her a word. She was like a statue; she did not even hear me; her mind was elsewhere; her stare was strange, wandering, and apparently followed her thoughts into space. Twice, a sad and feeble smile visited her lips, and she moved her head slightly, as if she was responding to some reflection of her own mind.

"At last, in absolute despair, I went down to Mademoiselle de Maran. This invariably selfish woman, could see nothing in the determination of Ursula, but what concerned herself personally. She exclaimed, in a sort of selfish pique, that after the departure of Ursula, the hotel de Maran would be left entirely deserted; that she had been accustomed to Ursula's wit and lively disposition, and could not endure the thought of losing her; that she was always frightened by solitude; and entreated me to unite my efforts with her's, to change the determination of Ursula, as if that was not my strongest desire on earth. In spite of her grasping avarice, Mademoiselle de Maran exclaimed, 'That she would make any sacrifices to retain Ursula! that if the forty thousand francs, which she had given me, was not sufficient to make her house pleasant, she would give me more; in short, all that was necessary, even if she was obliged to expend her capital! That she had such a short time to live, that she could afford the extravagance.'

"I have entered into these details, to show you, that Ursula had influence enough to overcome, even, the extreme avarice of Mademoiselle de Maran. who had thus far shamefully abused my prodigality; and had hardly allowed me sufficient money to sustain the establishment, which she had promised to do.

"Mademoiselle de Maran and myself now went to Ursula's room together. She entreated her not to go. She exhausted all the resources of her intellect and her suavity, to change her determination. But Ursula was inflexible; and Mademoiselle de Maran wept, (think of *her* weeping!) and exclaimed, amid her tears: 'That the situation of an old woman, abandoned to the tender mercies of menials and hirelings, was, indeed, awful! that she had made so many enemies, that when Ursula left, no one would call to see her! that the revolution of July had dispersed all the relatives upon whom she could rely!' Still Ursula remained unmoved.

"Mademoiselle de Maran, finally, became excessively enraged; she addressed violent reproaches, spoke of her ingratitude and wickedness. Ursula smiled, but opened not her lips. We asked her how she would live? She said, 'That she had still thirty thousand francs left from her dowry, and that was sufficient for her support.'

"Such is the painful situation in which I am now placed. I know Ursula's character so thoroughly, that I am convinced that nothing but a miracle can change her determination. For two whole hours I was unable to draw from her a single word. I have tortured my mind in vain, to ascertain the cause of this sudden resolution. My efforts have been as futile, as they were to fathom the cause of that melancholy and despondency, to which she has been for some time the victim. It cannot be remorse for her guilt. At first, I suspected that she cherished for some one a profound passion; but, although I have seen her flirt with several gentlemen of her acquaintance, and have often doubted her fidelity, my doubts never became certainties; for nothing in her intercourse with these gentlemen, indicated anything like a passion. Toward them, as toward me, she was fickle, capricious, and singularly haughty; but I never saw her sad or thoughtful, as she has been for month past.

"An idea presents itself to my mind, at this very moment. Yes! why should it not be? Do not laugh at me contemptuously! why should not Ursula's regrets spring from having caused me to squander more than half of my fortune!

"That which has always sustained me in my love, in spite of her capricious and haughty disposition, is the conviction, that she cherishes for me a love much stronger than she is willing to admit; concealing the depth of her passion out of pride, and through fear that I shall perceive the influence which I have over her: thinking that she can most effectually rule me, by alternate tenderness and indifference.

"In leaving Mademoiselle de Maran's so suddenly, without disclosing to me her intention to depart, why should not Ursula wish to demonstrate to me that she loves me for my sake alone, by renouncing all the splendour which I have lavished upon her? Subdued, finally, by so many proofs of love, is not the disposition of that eccentric female likely to spurn the luxury which first won her? Perhaps, she is dreaming of a quiet and retired life in some remote corner of France, or some foreign country? If it were so—if it were so, I should expire with joy! She has entirely changed my tastes and my habits. I now hate society as much as I formerly adored it. My only wish is, to pass my days in solitude which her presence only should relieve, where she should be entirely devoted to me, where every moment of her life should be mine. Do not look upon these words as vain or exaggerated. This intrigue has already existed for two years, and I love Ursula more ardently—more desperately, than on the day of its commencement. I know myself, I know the resources of her mind, so piquant, so original, so fruitful; her beauty so enticing and so faultless, that she is perennially new. Who would covet a harem that might take such a being to his bosom? When I had exhausted the delights peculiar to the honey-moon in the society of my wife, all my anticipated raptures fled away; no passion nor excitement was left to vary the monotony, to relieve the tax upon my satiated tenderness. But such intercourse with Ursula would be one incessant intoxication of delight.

"No! no! every thing is now clear to my mind. After hiding her passion for so long a period, Ursula can no longer dissemble it, and her love has, at length, burst forth. Is it possible, probable, natural, that a female, however corrupt, can remain insensible—can resist so much tenderness?

"Pride does not blind me. I have made to you the most humiliating confessions, so that I may be excused in a little self-praise: I am young, I have been very successful, I am not deficient in knowledge of the world, nor am I destitute of wit. I have been loved—passionately loved by women who, in the estimation of society, are worth as much as Ursula. To commence—by my wife, by Madame de Richeville. Why, then, should not Ursula return my love? She says that it is in vain for her to attempt it; for the very reason that I love her so much, she is indifferent to me. Such are mere paradoxes; she is conscious that she is subdued by her passion, but she is unwilling to own it.

"But that black domino! perhaps she may be jealous of me. I remember now having told her, a few days since, that I designed to attend the ball during the carnival. The events of yesterday prevented me. Ursula knew nothing of the change in my plan; she wished, probably, to watch me; she indulges occasionally in such sly manœuvres.

"I am rejoiced that I have written to you. I feel better and calmer as I conclude, than I did as I commenced my letter. My hopes revive. The more I dwell upon it, the more firmly am I convinced, that the obstinate secrecy of Ursula respecting her projects, and the cause of her despondency, are auspicious omens for me. She feared probably that her replies might reveal her secret; her assumed absence of mind answered her purposes perfectly. After an intrigue which has lasted for two years—disturbed occasionally, by jealousy and coldness—I must think, a man is not abandoned in this manner without some powerful motive. After the immense sacrifices which I have made to her, such conduct would be unnatural and barbarous. What, in short, obliged her to come to Paris? Her husband loved her sufficiently to receive her back again, after the scene of Maran. I have even suspected, that she might now return to her husband, her character is so exceedingly singular. But, no, no: it is impossible! Without undue vanity, I think I should not suffer in comparison with M. Secherin. I now remember certain remarks which produced but little impression upon me, when I forgot myself so far as to insult her. I could read in her eyes neither anger nor hatred—nothing but perfect indifference. Now Ursula is too violent and too haughty, not to have been affected by the insult—a powerful reason alone could have restrained the outburst of her feelings. Now what can that reason be, but her love for me? Was not my anger even a proof of love? Yes! once more I must tell you, how much I am rejoiced in having written to you. In thinking thus aloud and with confidence, in following one reason up to another, and assigning results to their appropriate causes, I have forgotten my despondency, and have reached almost the realization of my hopes. I close this letter in haste; answer me by every mail. My first three letters are still unanswered. I do not, however, much regret it, for you will be able to judge more clearly of my position, by having all the facts before you. Your long experience in the world, your great impartiality, and your clear and penetrating mind, will enable you to appreciate my position precisely; to give me serious advice, and to inform me whether, in your opinion, my conclusion is correct. All depends upon that; my future life hangs upon this last determination of Ursula. She at first frightened me; but I now see her from such a point of view, that a thousand delightful hopes are reflected. You may think that they are very weak; but do not, I pray you, destroy my illusions, without giving me excellent reasons therefore; for you will find that I adhere to this last hope, with the greatest tenacity, and——"

"Four o'clock.

"A curse on her, and on myself! Yes, on her! I have this moment received a note from Mademoiselle de Maran, informing me that Ursula has left the hotel, and that no one knows whither she has gone. She informed Mademoiselle de Maran by means of a note, that she would never see her again. Is it not horrible! What shall I do? alas! my presentiments! my foolish and insane hope! I see all clearly now, but I will be revenged. Answer me, do answer me: how wretched I am! Furies and hell! I will be avenged!

"G. DE LANCRY."

CHAPTER XI.

THE MASQUERADE BALL.

The letter, by means of which M. de Lancry informed one of his friends of the sudden disappearance of Ursula, completes in a striking manner the history of the fatal loves of my husband and my cousin. I had just finished what I was reading when M. de Rochegune entered my room. I had not seen him yesterday: having spent the entire day in a pious pilgrimage with Blondeau, I had passed the evening in the society of my melancholy thoughts alone.

"Well," said he, giving me his hand, "how do you feel? were you courageous yesterday?"

"Courageous? yes, I did not fear that I should be carried away by the regrets with which the loss of our excellent friend inspired me. Yet, I confess, that a thought almost painful mingled with my sorrow, because it resembled ingratitude."

"How so?"

"I thought that I should still have more lamented M. de Mortagne, had I not known you."

"I could address the same reproach to myself, Matilda, for I have comforted myself by determining to love her whom my friend loved—to protect her whom he protected: such thoughts are not faithless to his memory—

only at times I said to myself, he would have been proud and happy at the sight of our happiness."

"What a defender should we have found in him!"

"Do we need any? does not the world admit the sincerity of our love?—the world which has such slight faith in pure and interested sentiments—*our* love! if you but knew the charm contained in those words, for you love me, Matilda, you love me."

"Yes, yes: I love you, and sometimes I ask myself, by what insensible transformation, love sprung from the deep friendship which I always entertained for you."

"Hear me, Matilda! do you wish to make me happy?"

"Speak! speak!"

"Question your heart aloud; let me know how much you love me, at this day, at this hour: tell me all that is in it, good impressions and bad, with the most positive frankness. I will impart the same confidence to you."

"I think the idea a charming one; I should rejoice, now and then, to explain the extent of my love."

"It would be displaying to each other, from time to time, the increase of our treasures—the delights of the millionaire."

"Yes, and I think also, my dear friend, it would some day enlighten us with regard to some dangers, of which, through weakness or false delicacy, we might choose to be ignorant; and we ought to exercise toward ourselves the most implacable severity, when we think of the noble guarantee which waits on our love."

"Yes; hearts less courageous than ours would, perhaps, regret the position we have attained. But it is the same with certain positions as with threatened thrones—they cannot be abdicated without shame; the more we have to struggle, the more honourable will our struggle be."

"Say, also, the greater our happiness. The Prince d'Hericourt was relating an anecdote the other day, which struck me particularly—I will soon tell you of an analogy which I discerned in it. Charged with a mission, which was the more difficult, as he had to defend the best of causes against diplomatists of the most finished skill; instead of resorting to chicane, he followed, merely, the impulses of his noble character, and acted with such remarkable frankness, that his adversaries were completely baffled, and his mission resulted in the greatest success. And thus, he said to me, it is with life. Irreproachable conduct is not only the most honourable, but the most secure, the most advantageous, and the most ingenuous—one might say, if it were even all a subject of calculation."

"That is what he would call the cunning of an honourable man," said M. de Rochegune smiling. "I agree with him, but let me see the application of this generous theory."

"In a moment—but I must first inform you that I have disposed of your leisure for to-day."

"Indeed? what a pleasant surprise!"

"It is now three o'clock; I have some purchases of ancient bronzes to make, upon which I wish to consult your taste. The weather is very fine, we will walk, and I will take your arm."

"It is charming, and——"

"Wait, that is not all: this evening I shall meet you at Madame de Richeville's, where you are to dine as well as myself; and we will go from thence to the concert with her, Emma, M. de Semur, the Duchess de Grandval and her husband; we will then come here and take tea, for I am going to consecrate this little house, and I have confided the secret to you alone."

"Now, Matilda, I confess to my shame that I am almost indifferent to the application of the theory of the noble prince."

"You must yet hear me further: I have the strongest wish to see the pictures in the old gallery. You speak of painting like a poet; I do not mean that remark for a sarcasm, but an expression of praise, and I anticipate much delight in making the excursion in your company."

"No more than I do in yours; for I have always thought that it was necessary to be in love and to be loved, in order to appreciate all the beauty of great master-pieces of art; they are then seen through a medium of golden light, which makes them dazzle divinely—we shall need several days to do them full justice."

"I hope so, my friend, for we must be slow. Do you see me with my arm in your's, pausing in admiration before some creation of Raphael or Titian? What an inexhaustible topic for long and sweet conversation!"

"Yes; for your mind is keenly alive to impressions, and you possess an exquisite sense of the beautiful."

"And you, my friend, by what art I know not, always discover the means of applying everything we behold to our love. I am sure that in our pleasant walks through the galleries, you will prove to me that Raphael, Titian, Veronese, produced those works with express reference to our affection—selfish man!"

"Yes, genius grants its bounties, to each and to all; it answers every thought, as God answers every prayer."

"You will not be embarrassed in justifying yourself; I believe that even I could aid you. Now, here is the application of the Prince d'Hericourt's theory. Do you think that we could execute so many charming projects—that we could live from day to day without trouble or scruples, in this easy and delightful intimacy of every day, and of every instant, if our love were any different from what it actually is?"

"Oh! my friend," said I, unable to restrain a tear of joy, "woman alone can feel the tender and excessive gratitude which is due to him, whose delicacy knows how to save her from the shame, and the remorse of love!"

"And one must be loved by you, Matilda, to understand that there may exist celestial delights, in which the soul seems to swell with a passionate adoration;—that there are, in short, enjoyments so pure and etherial, that they dissolve all our sublunary instincts, in the exalted ecstacy to which they elevate us. I believe, now, in the delight of a union of souls."

"What increases my happiness in our love," said I to M. de Rochegune, "is, that it is exposed to no dangers—the fluctuations of ordinary passion; the elevated sphere in which it floats, lifts it above all the perils of satiety. Why should it not last for ever?"

"For ever! yes, for ever! for you have truly said, there is no mortal element in it. You have truly said, that the precious liberty which we enjoy is a delightful recompense. If you could but imagine all the rapture I experience in such a life—if you could know all the plans which I form!"

"You can form no idea of the projects in which I indulge; I am sometimes thrown into confusion, because they are so inseparably blended with your future."

"That future belongs to you—let this then no longer confuse you, Matilda."

"My confusion is the embarrassment of wealth. I have a thousand designs, and I hesitate at none. You do not know of how many romances you are the hero. For this year, however, I have determined upon a jaunt to Italy; we will travel with Madame de Richeville. The Prince and Princess d'Hericourt will join us at Florence, on their return from Goritz."

M. de Rochegune looked at me with much surprise, and added, smiling, "I know not why I should be astonished, I desired nothing else in the world—you have anticipated me, which is quite natural."

"Quite natural!"

"Yes; even at exciting your laughter at my metaphysics, I shall contend, that, from such sentiment, such projects naturally spring; the more exalted the sentiment is, the more frequent and *normal* these mysterious sympathies of the will become;—excuse me for that word."

"I will excuse you, on account of your theory; although very extravagant, it pleases me much. Thus, then, my proposed journey to Italy——"

"Charms me, I can have no greater pleasure than to travel with you over that paradise of promise—over that home of the arts."

"Perhaps we could then settle for some time in that country—one winter at Naples or at Rome;—what do you think of it? Madame de Richeville would be delighted by such a residence."

"I say nothing, Matilda: I wish for nothing: I think of nothing; you have my life—you may dispose of it."

"Well, then, we will spend a winter at Naples; and when we return from Italy, we can pass through Germany, so as to see the beauties of the Rhine, in all the beauty of spring. Perhaps we may sojourn for some time in one of those old castles, which command a view of that beautiful stream."

"That is another of your ideas, which would surprise me, if I was not already aware of the sympathy between us. The same idea occurred to my own mind on my return from Rouen. I hired the chateau at Aremberg. It is delightfully situated, and I spent three months in it. You will recognize the place, I am sure, where you dwelt so long with me in fancy. What a delightful prospect is before us, in the intimacy of travel. We shall still be nearer to each other. We shall exchange daily our impressions—our joys—our reveries—even our sadness."

"Our sadness?"

"Yes—the wishes of my father might have been realized."

"Be reasonable, my friend. Ought we not to give thanks to Heaven for the unexpected happiness which it grants us?"

"Oh! Matilda! there is no bitterness in that regret; it is one which is full of melancholy. Imagine a man perfectly happy upon earth—yet dreaming the happiness of heaven."

"But how far we have wandered from an examination of our hearts. I will not excuse you from the confessional."

"Well, Matilda, what do you feel for me at this moment? I listen to you with as proud an attention as a poet would to the recital of his lays; for, in a word, your love is my own work."

After a few moments of reflection, during which I examined my own mind with great fidelity, I replied to M. de Rochegune: "There is a very great difference between what I feel for you now, and the emotions which I felt some time since. I cannot explain myself, without resorting to a comparison. You just alluded, in your conversation about your travels, to a romantic castle on the banks of the Rhine. Well—when I am a traveller, if a situation, at once romantic and picturesque, arrests my admiration, my thoughts rest upon it with delight. I say to myself, How sweet it would be to spend my life in the midst of a vast solitude, enlivened only by the beauties of nature, the dark outlines of the mountains, the smiling meadows, the mysterious twilight of the woods, the clearness of the waters, the romantic spectacle of the lofty towers—I admire the whole. But the contemplation is not without its bitterness; for there is mingled with it a wish, that by some caprice of destiny, all this natural magnificence should belong to me solely. Let me but live for ever in this Eden:—when my admiration becomes exclusive—when these beauties become mine—I become proud of them—I deck myself with them. Then the chateau really becomes mine."

"Excellent, Matilda. May the security, the certainty, of the possession, recompense you for the want of that magnificence which would be worthy of you."

"Oh! my security is perfect, my friend; and I am certain that my confidence is not misplaced. I never shall be jealous of you; for you never can feel for another woman, the affections which you experience toward me."

"Neither those or any others, I assure you."

"My friend, let us speak of what is probable and possible. There are the promises of eternal fidelity, which only can be given by a woman's heart, and which a woman alone can be certain of fulfilling."

"Hear me, Matilda. I do not wish to exaggerate my feelings. Not only have I spoken to you with sincerity, but I am happily able to mention one fact, in proof of what I have alleged."

"Indeed; what is it?"

"Seriously, Matilda—since I have been assured that you love me, there exists no other woman in the world for me; you are the standard to which I apply every other being, and all become indifferent to me. I have the proof of it—a proof quite recent."

"Come, come—the proof," I said: "full confidence. I wish to see whether I have as little reason to be jealous, as you pretend," said I, smiling.

"The day before yesterday, when we left Madame de Richeville's, where we passed the evening together, I found a small billetdoux, when I returned nearly in these words:—'*A very unfortunate person, who has some claim upon your consideration, begs you to grant her a moment's conversation: and she can meet you upon no other occasion, than at the opera ball this evening.*'"

At these words of M. de Rochegune, I know not what foolish—what fatal thought passed through my mind! M. de Lancry, in the letter which I had just read, spoke of reproaches addressed to Ursula, on account of some masquerade ball, which she had visited secretly. I imagined, that my cousin was the heroine of the adventure which M. de Rochegune was about to relate to me. My excitement was so great, that I exclaimed, "At the opera ball the night before last!"

M. de Rochegune attributed this exclamation to some other cause than the real one.

"It may seem to you strange, Matilda; but have you forgotten that Thursday night was the night of the carnival? I regarded this appointment of an interview as quite singular. My first impulse was, not to go; but I changed my mind, after reflecting that some person in serious misfortune might not dare to reveal her sorrow, except under the protection of a mask. I forgot to tell you, that I was to be waited for from twelve till four in the morning. That proof of patience almost confirmed my suspicions. I therefore went to the ball; but unfortunately for the rendezvous, I was accosted by Madame de Longpré, whom I did not recognize until after a quarter of an hour's conversation; then by another lady, very gay, very amusing, whom I could not recognize at all; and whose talk I should have enjoyed highly, had I not supposed that some one was waiting for me with great anxiety. At length, I arrived before the clock at half-past two."

"Well, what happened?" said I, to M. de Rochegune, attempting to disguise my anxiety.

"As I was standing under the clock, I saw a female in a black satin domino; her head was sunk upon her breast. Absorbed in profound meditation, she probably did not perceive me. Wishing to ascertain if this was the individual with whom I had the appointment, I went to her and said, 'if you are waiting for any one, Madam, he is at the same time very happy and very culapble.' The domino shuddered; raised her head quickly and said in an agitated voice, 'I pray you, sir, let us leave the saloon.' There was a great crowd, and it was several minutes before we were able to pass through it, the movements of which brought me near enough to the stranger, while giving her my arm, to perceive that her breast was beating violently."

"And was the lady tall?"

"A little taller than you, Matilda; very slender, and seemed to possess a charming figure. To escape from the crowd, we ascended the corridor to the second boxes. The female trembled! I proposed to take a seat. 'No! no!' she exclaimed, in an agitated voice, and pressing my arm convulsively, *'it is the first time that I have been able to lean upon this noble arm, and it will be the last—let us walk.'* "

"But, what did she say to you? what did she want?"

"To speak to me, about you."

"About me?"

"With profound admiration."

"She wished to speak to you of me—of me!" I exclaimed, almost persuaded that the mysterious domino was no other than Ursula.

"Yes; to speak of you, in terms of admiration, which I envied. Never has your heart, your mind, or your misfortunes, been praised with more touching eloquence. I was delighted while listening to the female. I was charmed by the passionate admiration with which she spoke of our love and our happiness. Truly, Matilda, to understand the nature of those sentiments, she must have been almost capable of experiencing them."

"Do you believe so, my friend?"

"I have no doubt of it. What shall I tell you? having once commenced the conversation, under the protection, under the charm of your name, I anticipated with regret the moment when it would conclude. I never met a lady with a more active and appreciating mind. After having expressed her admiration of our love, she went on with sarcasms against those who were envious of it. I am much deceived, if that woman is not endowed with a character of severe energy: for, by a singular contrast, her voice—which was sweet and melodious in speaking of you, became sharp and imperious when she spoke of our enemies. I never shall forget the description which she gave of your husband, and your infernal cousin!"

"Did she speak to you about Ursula?" I exclaimed.

"For a long time, and with great indignation and contempt. She cut up Ursula and M. de Lancry without mercy. Your cousin was, I think, treated with more severity than your husband; she seemed to take a ferocious joy in upbraiding the shameful conduct of that woman. Her satirical mind lashed Mademoiselle de Maran with a force, a brilliancy, and a power which carried me away. In former times—and this is the point at which

I desire to arrive—in former times, I should have been captivated with her bold, and almost impudent style, when she attacked vice—with her sensibility and feeling, when she praised what was noble and beautiful. Well, these contrasts affected me powerfully, at the time, but have left no impression behind them. I am but little curious, even indifferent; whereas, formerly I should have exerted all my faculties to penetrate the real character of that mysterious creature. But it is quite natural, Matilda; every thing which does not concern you, inspires me with antipathy. You have rendered me very fastidious; you have, as it may be said, purified my taste, and raised me above the earth."

"And the lady—do you believe her to be beautiful and young?"

"I do not know whether she is beautiful or not; but the sweetness of her voice, the perfection of her form, the suppleness of her walk, incline me to believe that she is young. What do I say? I do not doubt it. I forgot that I saw her hand; and if I had not seen yours, I should have believed hers the prettiest hand in the world; but, at any rate, its whiteness, its round and polished outlines, announced youth certainly."

"And how did the conversation conclude? what did the woman want at last?"

"'She wished to have,' she said, 'the only conversation which it was possible for her to have with me; to judge for herself, whether what had been said about me was true, and to express to me the vows which she had offered up for our happiness; and finally'—but you will laugh at me and my unknown, and you will have good reasons for doing so."

"Speak! speak! I pray you."

"In the first place, Matilda, I must inform you that I was surprised; for I did not expect such a singular proof of admiration."

"Speak! speak! I assure you that I will not laugh."

"Well: at the time of parting, the unknown gave me her hand cordially. I took it,—but truly, it is as ridiculous to repeat the folly as to be guilty of it."

"I wish to know all."

"Prepare, then, to laugh. The unknown carried my hand to her lips, under her mask, with a movement of timid submission and passionate eagerness, which filled me with surprise. Her head was inclined downward—a tear fell upon my hand—and the black domino suddenly disappeared in the crowd."

Under some trifling pretext, I postponed until the next day the walk which I proposed to take with M. de Rochegune, and remained alone.

CHAPTER XII.

AWAKENING.

I WAS on the point of revealing to M. de Rochegune, who the mysterious domino actually was, that he had met at the opera; but fearing to act inconsiderately, I wished to give myself time for reflection. I knew thoroughly the heart and character of M. de Rochegune. He must necessarily feel for Ursula, great aversion and dislike; and yet that woman's powers of fascination were almost irresistible. I had fatal proof of it. By skilfully speaking in my praise, she had succeeded in securing a favourable hearing from M. de Rochegune, and in pleasing, interesting, and strongly exciting his curiosity. I was not sure that I could destroy all these impressions by naming my cousin; and by suffering him to remain in ignorance of her name, he would probably forget the mysterious interview. In his letter to a friend, unknown to me, M. de Lancry had spoken of the despondency in which Ursula was plunged, and of the extraordinary change which had taken place in her habits. She who had been formerly so trifling and careless, had now determined to leave the gay and brilliant society of the hotel de Maran, and she had fulfilled her resolution. In putting these facts in connection with the adventure at the opera house, I asked myself, whether a violent and impetuous passion for M. de Rochegune, whom she knew by sight, and of whom every lady spoke, had not assailed the heart of Ursula. I recollected the passage in her insolent letter to my husband, in which she described, with such burning eloquence, the love which she might perhaps, one day feel, for a man who could rule her despotically. In short, the woman had already been fatal to me in my dearest affections;—would she not persevere in her hatred, and injure me still more? I did not suspect the fidelity of M. de Rochegune. I did not disparage myself in a spirit of false humility; but I foresaw, vaguely, the dawn of some new misfortune—some unexpected calamity.

I was not mistaken. That misfortune happened—that blow struck me; if not from the hand of Ursula, at least from her influence, which has always proved fatal to me. What remains to me to enter on, is a psychological inquisition, so intricate, that I had to summon my most secret recollections to bring together the almost invisible links of the chain, which brought on one of the most important—one of the most painful events of my life. I have promised to disclose—even shameful weakness, even unpardonable errors; and I will not falter from a confession, however distressing—from an explanation, however singular it may appear.

Can you imagine what struck me the most in the interview between Ursula and M. de Rochegune? Can you tell what thrilled me with the deepest sensation—what overpowered all my thoughts—what filled me with confusion—what caused the first blush which coloured my brow, the first shame which entered my heart—what made me distrust myself, my courage, my virtue—my claims to the high esteem which was entertained for me?

It was the kiss which Ursula gave to the hand of M. de Rochegune.

It may appear extravagant, impossible, deplorable! I know it—for at this very moment, when I am writing in solitude, I cast down my eyes, as if my shame and confusion were visible to every one. Yes; when M. de Rochegune spoke of that kiss, my cheeks became crimson. I felt as if an electrical spark had passed into me;—a strange emotion, at once evident and painful, affected me with the most singular shuddering; all the blood in my system rushed to my heart, in spite of myself, while M. de Rochegune was speaking: I could not remove my eyes from his hand, as if I detected there the mark of the burning kiss which Ursula had imprinted upon it. For the first time, I perceived—or rather, I was pleased to observe—that his hand was of perfect beauty; for the first time, I felt a pang of jealousy, of which I dared not trace the cause nor the consequence. However trifling these emotions may seem, I was frightened at them, as symptoms. If my love had been as pure, as ethereal, as I had thought it, that kiss would not have made such an impression on me. This new proof of the antipathy of Ursula might have made me indignant, but it could not have troubled me. Alas! I do not intend to say that, unless that circumstance in the interview between M. de Rochegune and Ursula had happened, I should have for ever escaped from such emotions. Perhaps I only anticipated the fatal moment, when I was fully to perceive the vanity of all my noble aspirations—the weakness of my character—the tendency of guilty love! but I assure you, by all that I suffered, it was a distressing revelation to me.

Those who have for a long time implicitly relied upon themselves, on that stability and elevation of their principles, which raise them far above the common levels, can appreciate my grief.

I was not deceived—as a spark suffices to kindle a conflagration, that impression was sufficient to enlighten me as to the nature of my love. What would then my life henceforth be? If I should prove courageous enough to restrain my criminal inclinations, what struggles, what hidden torments, what burning tears, what shame would devour me in silence! What torture would that intimacy be to me, which thus far had been so sweet! what care must I take to guard constantly the unhappy secret, which an infection of the voice—a glance might betray! Must I destroy—must I tarnish by fear, by reverse, an affection which had thus far been so confiding, so pure, so holy?

And then, to fill the cup of my bitterness and misery, *she* was the cause of profaning my love. "No, no," I exclaimed; "I would rather a thousand times to die, than be guilty of this final baseness. Should I be base enough to yield, I should not only justify my husband in abandoning me, but also shamefully abuse my venerable benefactor." When I was alone, deserted, broken down by despair; friends had arisen to me, and sustained me; lavished on me attention and devotion; nay, were the more inclined to commiserate my past misfortunes on seeing my preference for a man who was worthy of me. These friends had said to me, "You have suffered much; your heart has been broken; but have courage, hope for better days. The tender friendship which we show you is not enough for one who has been so long deprived of all the sweets of affection; a sentiment stronger, but as pure as it is ardent, will engross your soul; we have for you, and the man you love, so complete a confidence, that we shall regard that love as your safeguard."

And I—am I unworthy of that confidence? if I were unknown in the world, I might be infamous enough to abuse it. Under the protection of such austere guaranties, if I should have the baseness to conceal a culpable love, would not such conduct sink me even below Ursula? She at least has the audacity to own her guilt; she tramples upon the laws of society, whereas I should but add hypocrisy to other ignominy. "No, no;" I exclaimed again, "I would rather die a thousand deaths than sink so low." Such was the future prospect which this thought, rapid and burning as lightning, disclosed to my view. At first, I rebelled against these conclusions—I wished to drive them from my mind; but they returned thither with redoubled power. I could not avoid thinking of the features of M. de Rochegune, of the graces of his person—I, who had hitherto been indifferent to these advantages—I, who had only admired him for his character and his moral qualities.

I cannot understand, even now, how the slight incident to which I have alluded should have produced so strong an excitement. These thoughts must have necessarily been, for a long time, smothered in my bosom; and nothing could have been wanting, but an occasion to draw them forth. I cannot describe my fears in contemplating the future—my gloomy anticipations, my vague terror. I must confess all. In my despair, I regretted being so highly esteemed by the world; for I could not fall without appearing doubly culpable.

Yes; many a time I envied those who were held in less consideration. Should I then fail in my duties, said I, the judgment of the world would be less severe;—the shameful conduct of my husband would excuse me. What shall I do? said I to myself; what must I do?—fly, abandon him whom I love? would it not be to isolate myself again, to surrender myself to tears and despair? No, no: I cannot endure the suffering. Can I leave also my good and devoted friends? Can I leave him whom I love with so much passion—so much idolatry? Was it then with this love, as with all others, which reveal their irresistible power at the first touch of sorrow? The first time it cost me tears, I felt for the first time its immensity. I wished to know whether my tears had actually a sufficient cause, whether my imagination had not exaggerated my sentiments. If, at the next interview with M. de Rochegune I perceived any change in my impressions, I should be comforted.

About six o'clock I went to see Madame de Richeville. M. de Rochegune was to dine with me there, and we were afterward to go to the concert.

"Well, my dear Matilda," said the duchess to me, "have you improved this delightfully cold day to make your purchases? What does M. de Rochegune think of the ancient bronzes? He is so much of a connoisseur, that I have perfect confidence in his taste."

For the first time, I felt that I blushed while speaking of him; but I endeavoured to reply in a firm voice—

"I have not been out; I have had a slight headache."

Madame de Richeville smiled, pointed her finger at me, and said, "The idle one has forgotten herself in her fine talk withher friend, and the bronzes have been sacrificed."

"No, I assure you that I——"

"Between us you are right; it is certainly difficult to tear yourself away from the charms of an agreeable conversation. I hope, however, you did not keep him too late. The concert commences with a symphony from Beethovén, and I should be sorry to lose it."

"M. de Rochegune left me very early."

"He must have had some important business, then, if he did not spend the entire morning with you. Indeed, my dear Matilda, I sometimes fancy that I am dreaming, when I think that such an intimacy exists between a lady of twenty and a gentleman of thirty, and that the scandal-mongers dare not breathe a word against you—for this good trait remains in the world, that people are enthusiastic for anything that is new, There are very few people, however, who have such qualities as yourself and M. de Rochegune, with which to silence calumnies."

These words of Madme de Richeville, which would have been very agreeable to me on the previous day, now renewed my embarrassment and blushes; but, fortunately for me, my hostess soon changed the subject, and did not discover my emotion."

"Men of heart and honour are very rare. I cannot avoid the reflection, when I think that one of these days Emma must be married."

"What do you fear, my friend? Does she expect to find a man worthy of her?"

"If maternal love does not blind me, she expects nothing at present; but, alas! to deserve is not to obtain."

"Only think how beautiful she is, and how wonderfully endowed."

"Yes; but her birth!" said the duchess; "I shall probably be obliged to find a husband for her in a class beneath our own. The fear does not proceed from my pride, but from my affection. There are a thousand delicacies of manner, prescriptive and almost general within our sphere, which we can find nowhere else. The more the character of Emma developes itself, the more am I convinced, that it would be impossible for her to endure certain manners and certain usages. Yet I am almost sorry that she is gifted with such an exquisite susceptibility; she is a perfect sensitive plant. But since our conversation has turned to that dear child, I must mention to you one fact which I have hitherto concealed."

I looked toward Madame de Richeville with surprise.

"Perhaps I am mistaken; since the remark which I have made does not seem to strike you, Matilda, who are particularly interested in it."

"Me? explain youself, I beseech you."

"Well, then," added Madame de Richeville, with some hesitation, "have you not perceived, for some time past, a slight change in the conduct of Emma toward you?"

"No, indeed—or rather yes; for it seems to me that she has been more tender of late, more obliging to me; and, perhaps, I have not mentioned to you a little childish speech which proves her warm attachment. About eight or ten days ago, observing her thoughtful, as she often is now, I said to her, 'What are you thinking about, Emma,?' '*I am thinking that I should like to be called Matilda,*' she replied. 'Why so? is not Emma a charming name?' 'Yes, but I prefer Matilda.' 'But for what reason?' said I. 'I prefer that name because it is yours.' I think that the dear child spoke truly, for her sincerity has always been of the most unquestionable character.

"You are right, Matilda; I have indeed studied her attentively; frankness is with her perfectly spontaneous, which explains to me many of Emma's singularities. The poor child does not know how to dissemble, she relates every thing that enters her mind; she almost thinks aloud, and the tendency of the feeling which she expresses seems to be almost unknown to her. I sometimes think that it may be a weakness of judgment."

"How can you indulge such a thought, when Emma astonishes yourself and your friends by her facility in acquiring knowledge, and the charming grace with which she answers questions that are put to her? I, who have often carried my self-examination to excess, find, that to unveil with perfect frankness all the impressions which the mind receives, is an attribute of a soul of angelic beauty alone. Do you not often discover greatness of mind, in a refusal to ask itself the aim and reason of thoughts?"

"Yes; you are right, you comfort me; your heart understands her, you love her like a sister, and the poor child cherishes for you the same feelings. You cannot imagine the admiration which she feels for you. She asked me to allow her to imitate you, to dress her hair in the same fashion which you use. That did not surprise me, for you arrange your hair in the most becoming style; and she asked me to allow her, so far as it may be becoming in a young lady, to follow your manner of dressing."

"Dear Emma! she loves me so much, and you have accustomed her to extol, in such a high degree, what you call my advantages; that in her simplicity she thinks she can express her admiration in no other manner than in imitating me."

"You are right, my dear Matilda; but there is one thought which strikes me: it is that——"

At that moment Emma entered the parlour, and Madame de Richeville made me a sign to remain attentive.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE CONCERT.

Emma approached Madame de Richeville, who kissed her upon the forehead; then, as was usual with her, after having embraced her mother, she came toward me;—but, all at once, she stopped, as if struck by some sudden thought; her lovely face and alabaster neck were suffused with a lively colour. For a moment she cast upon me a look from her large eyes, whose expression was indescribable; then she lowered them beneath her long eyelashes, and her countenance assumed a colouring more lively still. Her mother indicated to me, by a sign, that she wished me to take notice of Emma. The latter after a moment's silence, placed both her hands upon her heart, and said, with an accent of charming frankness:

"Heavens! how my heart beats!" and then added, while looking at her mother, "I do not know why I am unable to avoid blushing at the sight of Madame de Lancry; I feel so agitated, that I must pause an instant before I can embrace her."

And then, as if she had triumphed over an internal struggle which was depicted on her features, she cast herself upon my neck, saying, with a most bewitching grace:

"Ah! happily, it is over now, though for a moment it is truly painful."

Madame de Richeville gave me another glance, and said to Emma:

"But now, my child, what do you experience? What is this agitation?"

"I do not know," said she, shaking her pretty head, with an air of angelic innocence. "I arrived so joyfully; but, all at once, at the sight of Madame de Lancry my heart beat painfully; but this feeling has rapidly passed away, and all my happiness has returned on embracing her."

With that, Emma give me another embrace.

"And since what time, my dear child, have you experienced these sensations?" said I, pressing both her hands in mine.

"I do not know: they came by degrees; and that which I do not understand is, that every day, both my pain and pleasure increase. Yet, no," she added, as if interrogating herself; "no; it is more than pleasure that I experience, now that the pain has subsided, which your presence first caused me."

"How is that?" demanded her mother, interested, like myself, in the last observation."

"It is," said she, hesitating, "as if I had the consciousness of having done a good action—as if I had triumphed over a wicked thought."

"But what is this wicked thought?" said I.

"I do not know—I do not believe I ever had it," she answered; "but yet it appears as though the wrong were the same."

Madame de Richeville and myself still looked at each other in silence. Madame de Semur and the Duke and Duchesse de Grandval were successively announced. The conversation became general. M. de Rochegune, who was the only one now expected, soon arrived. After shaking hands with Madame de Richeville, he approached me. Involuntarily, my first thought was, to refuse the hand which he extended to me. Observing his astonishment, I hastened to accept it.

I do not know whether he found mine burning or cold;—I do not know whether he noticed my blushes, and the slight trembling by which I was agitated;—I do not know whether he guessed the motions which afflicted me;—but he retained my hand within his own, for perhaps a second longer than was benefitting, and I withdrew it hastily.

"How do you do?—have you got rid of your nervous headache?" he asked, with a feling of interest.

"I thank you, *sir*, a thousand times; I continue to feel some pain."

My answer excited new astonishment in M. de Rochegune. Our intimacy had been so openly acknowledged in the small circle of Madame de Richeville, that I never addressed him as *sir*, nor did he ever call me *madam*.

For the first time, I was confused at this proof of intimacy. Dinner was announced. M. de Grandval offered his arm to Madame de Richeville. M. de Rochegune offered his to me. I said to him, almost in a tone of reproach, and in a low voice:

"And Madame de Sémur?"

It was too late. Madame de Sémur, passing before us, had taken, in a lively manner, the arm of Emma. Now that I recall to mind, one by one, all these awkward incidents, or rather all these involuntary confessions, I can only attribute them to my cruel confusion—to my absolute want of dissimulation. Without believing myself guilty, I had already lost my serenity of conscience. I felt a repugnance to enjoy the pleasing privileges of which I considered myself less worthy.

If reflection had not already quickly convinced me of the effect of my imprudence, the expression of M. de Rochegune's countenance, the intonation of his voice, as he sat beside me at the table, would have informed me of it.

"What, in the name of Heaven! was the matter with you a little while ago," he said to me, in a sad and soft voice.

These words recalled me to myself. For the first time, I understood the necessity of dissembling;—at all events, willing to forego, until a later moment, the justification of my late answer, I replied to M. de Rochegune, with a smile:

"Nothing was the matter with me. It was mere childishness, which I will explain to you; besides, I am suffering somewhat from my nervous headache; but I feel that it will soon pass over."

Encouraged by these words, M. de Rochegune entered into conversation with his usual spirit. I entirely recovered myself. The only thing which struck me as singular, was the frequent looks which Emma cast toward me. She appeared desirous of penetrating the very depth of my thoughts. At first, I returned her look with a smile; but her features remained as impassible as a mask of marble;—her look became so steady and penetrating, that, feeling uneasily, I endeavoured to avoid it. I was on the point of again yielding to my feelings—foolishly believing that Emma had conjectured the thoughts which agitated me; but, with a renewed effort—with a renewed exertion of the will, I elevated myself above such impressions. Then, to this constrained effort, there succeeded a species of enthusiasm which I could not resist; instead of feeling ashamed at the emotion which I first experienced in the presence of M. de Rochegune, I blindly surrendered myself to it. On my cheeks I felt a slight feverish heat; my reserve was completely dissipated. I became very talkative, and frequently Madame de Richeville and our friends made remarks upon my liveliness, which even astonished myself. The dinner was very amusing. Almost immediately after it was over, we set out for the concert. This time I very courageously accepted the arm of M. de Rochegune. I made a firm resolution. I desired to make a decisive proof, by passing the entire evening with M. de Rochegune. I did not change, in the least degree, my habits of familiarity. I was unwilling yet to question any new impressions that I might experience toward him. For once, well convinced that my fears were well founded, I would then enter into a firm resolve.

We arrived at the concert. I was placed in the front seat, between Madame de Richeville and Madame de Grandval; the gentlemen of our party were behind us. I do not know whether my conquered and subdued emotions, joined to a kind of nervous irritation which I found in myself, predisposed me more strongly than usual to the enjoyment of music; but I experienced a most unspeakable ecstacy, and my intoxicated soul was swept away in the waves of that harmony, by which I was swayed. Above all, I remember how, by an odd coincidence, everything concurred to enrapture me still more.

Rubini was singing most charmingly his air, in the *somnambula*. Madame de Richeville, in a transport of involuntary admiration, seized my hand, saying to me,

"Heavens? how sublime that is!"

Behind me was placed M. de Rochegune. He was partly leaning forward, that he might better hear Rubini. His breath—which I lightly felt on my bare shoulder, and in the curls of my hair—caused a sudden thrill to pass through me; and further, while listening to those songs which were so deeply passionate, I inhaled the penetrating perfume of a magnificent bouquet of roses and stephanotis—the cherished gift of a beloved friend.

No, no—never, during my life, shall I forget that moment of perfect happiness. To have beside one her best friend—to enjoy the presence of the man who is adored—to be lulled by the most enchanting sounds, and inebriated by the perfume of flowers, received from the lover's hands;—is not this enough to steep the senses in the very intoxication of pleasure?

I will not shrink from any avowal. I have confessed it.

I recollect, with a kind of voluptuous anguish, that, until then, I had never experienced the like. Never had the presence of M. de Rochegune so violently agitated me, or caused so delicious an emotion. I remember, in fact, the change which influenced my love—a change so guilty, as to give to all my feelings, but lately so sweet and serene—a keenness so bitter and consuming, as both to charm and terrify me at the same moment. Yes; at that instant, I, who had ever been without vanity, felt most proud of my beauty. My countenance must have betrayed me; for, after Rubini had finished, and Madame de Richeville and myself had leaned back by the side of M. de Rochegune, the duchess, after contemplating me a moment, in silence; said, in a low voice, to our friend—

"Look at Matilda; I never saw her look so beautiful."

He fastened his eyes upon mine, with an air both of astonishment and rapture; shivered slightly, and, by an expressive sign of the head, assented to the admiration of Madame de Richeville.

"Do you, indeed," said I to the latter, "think me beautiful now? I should be delighted, if it were so," I added, looking at M. de Rochegune, steadily: "I never shall be happier, to be thought beautiful."

M. de Rochegune surveyed me with equal steadiness, for a second. It is impossible to describe the electric power of that look, which agitated the inmost fibres of my heart. During the short space in which I gave way to my thoughts, I experienced intoxication, faintness, ecstacies, and fears, which banished from my mind the present, the past, and the future. Yes; in that gaze of a second, which answered to my own, I saw kindled, in an instant, the fires of the most ardent passion.

The concert recommenced. M. de Rochegune leaned forward, as if oppressed, and rested his forehead upon both hands. I frequently turned my head round to notice him, and found him always in the same position.

The concert ended. It was agreed that we should take tea at my house, and I invited some persons of our society, whom I met at the concert.

I returned in the carriage with Madame de Richeville, Emma, and M. de Rochegune—the latter was very taciturn, and lost in thought. I asked Emma if the music had given her pleasure:

"No, it gave me pain; I suffered much," said she in a low voice—"it was with the greatest difficulty that I avoided weeping. It appears to me, that singing transforms itself into a harmony of heart-breaking sadness to me."

We reached my house.

In passing before the glass, I was struck with the appearance of my face. Why should I not confess this vanity? as Madame de Richeville had told me, I was more beautiful than ever. I recollect that I wore a dress of light-blue watered silk, trimmed with lace and carnation ribbons; camellias, of the same colour, were placed in my fair hair, the long locks of which floated down almost to my shoulders.

During the hasty glance which I took of my person, it seemed to me that my figure was more elastic, my eye more brilliant, my complexion more transparent, my lips more rosy, my gait more majestic. I felt that I was ruled and animated by some superior power. I entertained views of happiness which were almost ideal, when I encountered the anxious and tender gaze of M. de Rochegune.

I was entranced in admiration of his noble countenance. I was surprised that I had never before observed his personal advantages;—for beauty is to man what grace is to woman; each of his glances penetrated into my soul, and filled it with confusion. I could no longer deceive myself; this fatal experiment revealed to me all the extent—all the depth—of my passion.

The evening passed away like a dream. Singular to relate, in spite of the pre-occupation of my mind, I performed admirably the duties incumbent upon me as hostess. When she left me, Madame de Richeville kissed me, and told me, "I will repeat to you, what I have before told you—that your face never appeared more charming." Notwithstanding my tender affection for Madame de Richeville, I was glad to see her depart. I felt that the artificial spirits which had thus far sustained me, were now abandoning me.

As soon as the duchess had left me, exhausted with the emotions of the day, I felt that I was fainting; and soon fell almost senseless, into the arms of poor Blondeau. The trial through which I had passed, convinced me, that my pure and sentimental love was a dream—a chimera. Had the weakness of my character, or the ardour of youth put to flight these delightful illusions? Or is such love, in fact, one of those Utopian—one of those fatal surfaces—which hide an abyss? I knew not. Had not other women preserved a just and prudent medium between indifference and passion? Were their natures firm enough—their souls so elevated—that they could smother the timid and bashful whisper of desire?—I knew not. Is, in short, platonic love possible, between two persons, who adore each other with all the ardour and reverence of youth? I hope so;—I believe so. I would rather entertain doubts respecting myself, even respecting, others, than surrender entirely a moral and consolatory idealty. The rapidity with which bad thoughts invaded my soul, frightened me; and the lurid light they threw over the calm attachment which I had cherished but the day before, alarmed me.

How sullen and cold my past happiness appeared to me?—with what ingratitude did I spurn from me the elevated delights which I had enjoyed. That sudden change is still an inexplicable problem to me. Even if I had forgotten my duties toward M. de Rochegune—said I to myself—his words could not be more affectionate, his kindness more charming—his attentions more delicate. Can there, then, be in guilt, and the remorse which it produces, a fatal attraction? Can there be, in the violent agitations of a troubled conscience, a fascinating charm? Or, do we believe that we cannot give an absolute proof of our love, excepting by sacrificing to it virtue, peace of mind, and the repose of life?

I was still bitterly humiliated by the thought, that our affection was, perhaps, profaned by myself alone; and that M. de Rochegune had probably sufficient strength of mind to overcome his passions—to prefer a happiness, pure and holy, to the anguish of a culpable love, which might prove mortifying and ephemeral—yes, mortifying and ephemeral;—for the consciousness of a first fault carries with it the horrible penalty, of destroying all self-confidence and self-respect. If we have once broken the most noble resolutions, why shall we not break them again? If we at first believed in the power of the soul over the senses—but were deceived—why should we not be again deceived, as to the constancy of the passion to which we surrender ourselves? Once more—there is nothing more horrible, than the idea of that successive degradation, which the first departure from virtue drags after it!

CHAPTER XIV.

THE CONFESSION.

You may be astonished, that I should reason in the same manner as if I had been already culpable;—it is because I foresaw, that if M. de Rochegune was as weak as myself, I should not have sufficient strength to resist my inclinations. The moral consequences of this venial fault were also the same; I could see but little difference between the conviction that I should become guilty, and the remorse which follows actual shame. I could rely upon nothing but the delicacy and honour of M. de Rochegune; I had, therefore, determined to conceal from him all the novel emotions, of which I was the victim. I felt, that if I was once suspected, I was lost.

I expected to see M. de Rochegune the day following the concert. He came about two o'clock, very affectionately, and begged of me to exclude all visitors. I observed that he was pale and dejected, and there was an indescribable languor in his countenance, which I had never observed before. Some decisive movement was necessary upon my part. I felt that my whole destiny depended upon the firmness of my resolution. I summoned all my strength, all my powers of dissimulation, in order to compose my features, and to appear careless and gay.

I hastened to say to M. de Rochegune, in a very lively manner, "You must have found me exceedingly tedious, yesterday morning, did you not? After requesting your arm for a walk, I sent you away—confess, that I am very capricious."

M. de Rochegune was silent for a moment, and then said to me:

"Matilda! do you believe in my honour?"

"Good Heavens! what a grave preface, my friend."

"Grave, very grave, and it should be so."

"And why?"

After another pause, he proceeded: "Matilda, I never told a falsehood. Yesterday I promised to confide to you all my thoughts, good or bad. I did not then think that I should so soon be compelled to keep my promise."

"Indeed, my friend, you almost frighten me—what is this sudden change?"

"Matilda! it seems to me like a dream! To explain what I feel, is impossible. I yield, I know not, to what fatal charm, which, since yesterday, has overcome my firmest resolutions, and my most fixed principles. I am not the same man, nor you the same woman!"

"What can you mean?"

"Since yesterday, you appear to me different from what you ever appeared before."

"I! I do not understand you," said I, endeavouring to smile; "I cannot conceive why I appear to you in so different an aspect, since yesterday."

"I have in vain attempted to explain the cause of the transformation. I have been unable to do it. I have in vain asked myself, why your presence yesterday produced an emotion which I have never felt before. Your countenance was not even the same; for Madame de Richeville remarked it, as well as myself, and told you that you never appeared so charming before, which was true. Your expression, which is usually so calm, so mild, and so serene, was by turns full of excitement or of languor; your voice was more thrilling, your complexion more animated, your smile more enchanting; and I thought I perceived a shiver as I breathed upon your shoulder. You were surrounded by a magnetic atmosphere, which attracted and overpowered me. No, no; it cannot be an illusion—you were, and are now, more beautiful than you ever were before; or rather, your loveliness has received an additional charm."

"You are certainly much more poetical than usual, my friend, and you seem desirous of trying me with new flatteries. My dress was, probably, more becoming yesterday, which explains all the mystery of the change. There is certainly no change in the sentiments, as a friend and sister, which I feel toward you."

"My sister! my sister! I never loved you as a sister—I have told you so before. Only thus far I have had courage—thus far I have had a will of my own—thus far I have supposed I could love, with impunity, a woman like you. Until now, I have supposed that the intimacy in which we lived, could be sufficient for me. I have believed that the sublimity of an ideal love, and the admiration with which it inspired me, would raise me above all less ethereal instincts. But, Matilda, I no longer possess that courage—I no longer hold to that doctrine; resolutions, vows, promises, are all forgotten —my passions, so long restrained, have overpowered my will. I confess it, I confess it, Matilda, I alone am culpable; but I beseech you to have pity upon me, for my burning and passionate love has disordered my reason."

I trembled at the danger to which I was exposed. In revealing to me his own emotions, M. de Rochegune had also revealed my own. I could scarcely contain a secret feeling of pride and happiness, at knowing that I was so passionately adored. I soon, however, gathered my courage—I felt myself strong, in beholding M. de Rochegune so weak. I said to myself, that it would be a beautiful act of benevolence to elevate again that noble soul to its former height, and to save both him and myself. I only feared the influence of my feelings, so long as he participated in them.

After a few moments silence, I replied to him in an affectionate tone, yet calm and serious:

"Pardon me, my friend, for replying to you at first so pertly. You have given me, in this confession, a touching proof of confidence, for which I thank you;" and I gave him my hand, with dignity. The reserve of my language struck him. I continued:

"Although there is, perhaps, some exaggeration in what you have told me, I am not surprised at it—I have expected it."

"You, Matilda!"

"Yes, my friend. Remember our conversation of yesterday—did you not tell me, 'the intimacy in which we live, is only to be guarded by our sacrifices; the greater they are, the greater will our merit be.'"

"Matilda!" he exclaimed with excitement, "speak not of the past, an abyss yawns between yesterday and to-day!"

"Then, my friend," continued I, smiling, "like the fairy in the legend, I will throw an invisible bridge over that abyss—I will take you by the hand, and will lead you back into the celestial regions of purity, where, as in past days, our souls will rise, proud of their elevation."

In spite of the smile upon my lips, my heart was grieved. M. de Rochegune appeared painfully affected by my words. He remained silent for a moment, and then continued, with a sadness that was almost fearful:

"You are right, Matilda, the past has been as you describe it; I did entertain that noble faith, those generous aspirations: I did love you thus. My character was energetic, my will firm, my word sacred, my heart brave, But some incomprehensible phenomenon has changed the whole. I cannot understand it—yet it is true. Even yesterday, I was telling you of the happiness which I enjoyed; I could almost see the best wishes of my father realized. To-day, my ambition has been changed into frenzy; but that ambition has not sunk me in my own esteem—it has elevated me."

"What do you mean, my friend? would it not be to profane our love, to——"

He did not allow me to conclude; but said, in a grave and thoughtful tone,—"To profane it? oh, no, Matilda! do not suspect in what I say to you, any of that subtlety by which the hypocrite would disguise a culpable love. I only express to you the ardent desires of youth; I express also, the most noble wish which God hath implanted in the heart of mortals—the wish for lasting happiness by the domestic fireside. In one word, Matilda, I shall worship you more as a wife, than as a mistress. You are, at the same time, so beautiful and pure, that the passion which you inspire, becomes chaste and serious; your thoughts sanctify everything:—they would even give, to a culpable love, the sacred character of conjugal affection."

"Well, my friend, I entreat you, by the sentiment which you entertain for me, to moderate your enthusiasm."

"No, no! the happiness which I enjoy does not satisfy me—because it is incomplete. It is not the liberty of seeing you which I crave; but I desire to spend my whole life with you, to be bound to you by indissoluble ties; I desire the right of revealing to you the full extent of my devotion, of being indebted to you for all my happiness."

"But have you not always been to me a friend of unequalled kindness and devotion?"

"And what is that compared to a life in which we could enjoy all the gifts which God bestows on those he loves?—in which we could learn from admiration to worship?—in which the moral would increase the charms of the physical beauty?—for if God intended that a noble soul should inhabit a noble form, in order that these two charms should be united; to separate them, would be to wrong nature."

"What language!"

"It differs much from my language of yesterday; but I spoke the truth then, and I speak it now."

"But the change is sudden?"

"It confounds me, overwhelms me, Matilda: to explain it, I must resort, to the common illustration—that the last drop of water causes the cup to overflow. The most trifling circumstance decides the most important events, when the hour arrives. To-morrow, the accent of your voice, the pressure of your hand, might have set free the full violence of my restrained passion. When I spoke to you of sacrifices yesterday, Matilda, I did not use a vain expression—but heroism has its limits; and one fixed thought is now ever present to my mind. It is of living with you, in the depths of some solitude; for to me, the pleasures of the world are vanity. Matilda, if you would——" but he interrupted himself, fearing that he had said too much.

I understood him too well—I had myself the same wish. But it was necessary that my lips should longer continue to belie my thoughts—to disguise the impulses which I felt in the bottom of my soul. It was necessary, for the same end, to answer him with cold and severe words.

"Indeed, my friend," I replied, "I find you much altered. Is it you, who propose to me to trample under foot all the proprieties of life, all its duties? to prove to our friends, that their confidence has been misplaced? Think of the sarcasms that they would aim at us. Would it not be, in fact, to make them the accomplices of our guilt, after they have relied upon our principles and our honour? Now, be frank, and answer me: If I should consent to fly with you, what would the Prince d'Hericourt and his wife, who have so nobly protected us, think?"

This question seemed to embarrass M. de Rochegune; he hesitated for a moment to reply, and I was sorry that I had proposed it; for, it seemed to me, alas! to admit of no answer.

During this conversation, in spite of the apparent reserve of my words, I was conscious, from my inward agitation, that I was more in love than ever; and I was even more passionately in love than M. de Rochegune himself. My passion drew nearer a paroxysm every instant, and I was on the point of saying to him, "let us fly," when he continued sadly.

"I have never been guilty of a falsehood, Matilda; nor will I, on this occasion. If you will consent to go with me, I will disclose the whole to the prince."

"And what reproaches would not he have a right to address you?"

"After all, who cares," said M. de Rochegune, with a painful expression, "for the opinion of the prince, or the world?"

"Will you dare to brave it? When we renounce society, do we not condemn ourselves? Do we not virtually surrender its esteem?"

"What more can be required? Could we not have acted less nobly? Could we not have abused the confidence bestowed upon us? It is not difficult to deceive those who are prepared to be deceived beforehand."

"Both you and myself are incapable of such infamy."

"I know it. Should we have courage to renounce the high position to which we have elevated ourselves? Have we not always proved ourselves worthy of it? A shameful fall would be a voluntary abdication; we should sacrifice to our own enjoyment, the admiration of the world. There is neither shame nor treachery in this—I would say it to the face of any one."

"Alas! my friend," said I, interrupting him, "should we avoid being guilty, by publicly confessing our guilt? That would not be a generous courage, but a gross breach of all propriety: should we fall, we should be compelled to fly like criminals."

"If that happy time should ever arrive, it would be the proudest day of my life."

"Can you speak in this manner of my shame and dishonour?"

"Dishonour! Are you not free? Has he not virtually divorced you? Is there any resemblance between your situation and that of other women?"

"No! at this day and at this hour, I cannot be compared with any other; but, should I forget my duties, I should to-morrow resemble a thousand other females, who avenge themselves upon the deceit of their husband, by deceiving him in their turn. Shall I, too, fall from the summit of human elevation to the depths of contempt?"

"And will not that contempt secure your own happiness, and avenge you? He who lives for the world may fear it, but he who lives for himself, in solitude, is above the world. Friends, pride, ambition, duty, I have forgotten all. I live for one thought, for one desire; you—and you only."

"What! your life, your future, the unfortunate people depending upon you, your country, to whom your eloquence is so often serviceable?"

M. de Rochegune shrugged his shoulders: "Politics are nothing but chimeras;—as for my beneficiaries, I can administer to them from my retreat. We will be as an unseen Providence to them; they will lose nothing: such love as ours will increase our benevolence. You look at me with surprise. Matilda, you are astonished to hear me speak in this manner, who was formerly anxious for what I now despise."

"I am both surprised and rejoiced."

"What do you say?"

"This sudden change in my thoughts proves that my influence over you is increasing. I was formerly proud of that influence; it inspired you with the noblest actions;—but I blush for the incentives which it gives to actions unworthy of us."

"And why do you say so? Who can say that some illustrious example of devotion may not spring from our tumultuous passions? I know not what the future has in reserve, but God did not create us in vain. Yes; and our apparent fall will conceal some mysterious purpose. Two souls like ours cannot meet in a true and deathless love, without having some influence upon mankind. Yes; a voice, which has never deceived, now whispers that, in spite of reproaches and banishment from our friends, they will be drawn back to us by a chain of events, and become more devoted to us, because we shall be worthier of them."

"In what manner?"

"I know not, but I am sure of it. I tell you, that whatever appearances may be, our love will be as pure and elevated as heretofore: the future will prove it."

The accent and countenance of M. de Rochegune expressed full confidence in what he uttered. I felt almost persuaded that a brilliant destiny was in reserve for our love, and that, in spite of my determination to remain cold and sullen, I must give way to my excitement; and I exclaimed:—

"Yes, yes, I believe you; it seems to me that you interpret the inmost thoughts of my heart."

"Matilda!" he exclaimed, falling upon his knee and taking my hand in his, with a gesture of passionate love; "come, my friend, let us fly: my love—my angel—my wife!"

These words, and the enraptured looks of M. de Rochegune, restored me to myself. I drew back suddenly.

"Matilda," he exclaimed, hiding his face in his hands, "pardon me; I am mad."

A few moments sufficed to control my emotion. I told him, in as cool a manner as I could, "You are indeed mad, to believe that I should expose myself to blush both for you and for myself."

He cast upon me a disconsolate look, and exclaimed, in a distressing tone—"Alas! you do not love me as I love you!"

"I confess it."

If I had the strength not to undeceive him—not to own to him that I shared his inordinate passion—his ideas, just or unjust, elevated or ignoble—it was because, at that very moment, I was adopting the resolution to fly with him, if, after a final and desperate struggle, I could not overcome this fatal passion.

To reserve to myself full liberty to act, it was necessary that I should move from him all hope, and render him my auxiliary, unknown to himself, in the struggle which I wished to attempt.

"I do not love you!" said I to him. "Can you address to me so cruel a reproach? Is it not because I fondly love you, that I have the courage to save both you and myself from eternal remorse?"

He arose, and commenced walking to and fro in great agitation, wiping the tears from his eyes. I had still a hard trial before me. Some locks of his hair having been displaced, I saw, on his forehead, the scar of that wound which he had formerly received in coming to inquire for me, when he was caught by M. Lugarto's stratagem. The sight of that scar, recalling to my mind the long years of M. de Rochegune's devotion, rendered it still more painful for me to hide from him the emotions which I felt. He stopped suddenly before me, and said:

"Matilda, do you believe that it is possible for me to hide from our friends the emotions which agitate me?"

"I think that, by reflecting upon the cruel consequences which——"

He interrupted me: "Reflection! the will has no power to conceal so powerful a feeling. Will not our friends also observe, every instant, a restraint—an affected reserve—which will contrast too strongly with our habitual intercourse?"

"It may be so, my friend; but by commanding your feeling, this passing excitement will die away. You are so resolute, that you will overcome this insane passion."

"It is because my character is firm and resolute, Matilda, that I feel still more powerfully the sentiment which subdues me; but it is also because I am firm and resolute—" and then he hesitated.

"Speak, my friend, speak!"

"Well, it is because I am resolute, that I shall have strength enough to adopt the only resolve which can save us both:" then, his lips contracted by despair he said in an agitated voice, "I shall have strength to separate myself from you."

This blow was so terrible—I was so unprepared for it, that I exclaimed, clasping my hands:

"Part from me!—no, that cannot be! Good God! you cannot entertain the thought!"

"But what then shall I do, unhappy woman? To cease visiting you?—that would create a thousand suspicions; would provoke inquiries from our friends, which will be the more urgent, as we ought not to conceal anything from them. To live with you as heretofore, is impossible to me. I will, therefore, under the pretence of a journey——"

"You shall not go—I will not permit you! I do love you; and have treasured in you all my hope—all my futurity! It is impossible for you to abandon me thus. There cannot be such cruelty in your heart."

"But what can I do?"

"I know not; but for heaven's sake!—in the name of your father's memory, do not desert me! I could not survive it! I have been so wretched, that I have no strength left for new sorrows!"

"Hear me, Matilda. You do not believe me capable of threatening you with a departure, in order to compel you to follow me. I never speak nor act inconsiderately. After having considered everything, I see no other alternative. I will then depart, and may God help us!"

"Heavens! you frighten me!" I exclaimed, struck with the desponding expression of his countenance.

He understood my meaning, and replied: "My thoughts upon the subject of suicide will never alter; it is a cowardly act, and I am incapable of being a coward. It is because I cannot commit self-murder, that I shall henceforth be the most wretched of mankind!" and again, sobbing violently, he concealed his face in his hands.

Overcome by his tears, I was on the point of confessing to him everything; renouncing the last struggle, and telling him how much I loved him, when, after a moment's silence, he raised his head and said:

"We are mad! to think of deciding, in one hour, the destiny of our whole lives, Matilda! Not a word more—we are under the influence of too strong excitement to continue this conversation. I will depart to day, and will return in a fortnight, with my own mind unchanged. I assure you of it. But as for you, leisure will be afforded you to consider maturely, the proposition which I have just made. I will return then, to consecrate to you my whole life, or to part with you for ever! I will not write to you. I will leave you alone to commune with your own soul. All my hope is, that the past will speak to you of me, and that the future will speak to you for me." Then giving me his hand, in a most solemn manner, he told me in a voice trembling with emotion, "We will meet once more, in a fortnight!"

I pressed his hand, repeating, "In a fortnight!" and he disappeared.

CHAPTER XV.

A VISIT.

After the departure of M. de Rochegune, I melted into tears. I reproached myself for my apparent insensibility. I feared that I had plunged him into despair, and had perhaps driven him from me for ever.

I regretted bitterly that I had not followed my first impulse, which prompted me to abandon everything and follow him. If he should desert me, would the cold and heartless esteem of the world compensate me for the loss of that love, in which I had concentrated all the hopes—all the happiness of my life? In the midst of these distressing perplexities, I asked myself, whether it was not more through pride, than through principle, that I resisted? I endeavoured to convince myself that it was, in order to have a pretext for yielding to the wishes of M. de Rochegune.

Then I reflected with rapture on the life which I could enjoy with him. The strength of his character, his talents, his exquisite tenderness, all foretold the most joyful existence for me. I perceived, more and more, the truth of M. de Rochegune's former remarks. Had not my love for M. de Lancry been a surprise of the heart? I had no serious reason for loving him before my marriage. His pleasing person, the graces of his wit had won me. In my determination to marry him, notwithstanding the prudent council of Madame de Richeville and M. de Mortagne, there was more of thoughtlessness, more of a disposition to escape from Mademoiselle de Maran, than of matured love. Afterward, when the wrongs of my husband toward me became intolerable, I continued to love him from the mere effect of habit, through heroic endurance and self-denial; and more particularly in consequence of that almost irresistible influence, which the first man she loves always exercises over a young girl. In my sorrow, I detested the word love; I used to blush at it as at a criminal thought; and yet, in cherishing that love for my husband, I fulfilled a sacred duty. At length, when driven to despair by his final treason, which cost me the life of my child, I escaped from the tyranny of M. de Lancry, and I only retained for him a cold contempt.

What a difference, on the contrary, was there in my love for M. de Rochegune! His generous devotion to me—the admiration which his distinguished qualities inspired, had, at once, almost unknown to myself, planted in my heart the deep roots of that love. When I found myself morally free, he gave me new and touching proofs of the most constant, and most elevated affection. To my admiration for him—a severe and controlling sentiment—was united a warm and tender friendship, which was followed by pure and ideal love, and, finally, by burning passion. The gradual changes of the sentiment insured its permanency.

Like all great, predominating, and lasting things, that love had a deep and solid foundation. As the oak—which the lightning rends, but does not uproot—that love had imperceptibly grown; the storm might scatter its leaves, but never could tear it from the earth, whence it sprung:—in one word, such was the difference between those two loves. In loving my husband, in devoting myself to him with the blindest self-denial, I had experienced a sort of shame; I had been the most wretched of women. While resigning myself with courage, my sufferings had excited but little sympathy; my resignation appeared soulless. On the contrary, I was happy and proud of my love for M. de Rochegune; the world approved of me; I felt elevated by that sentiment, which the most inflexible morality sanctioned. At times, these reflections seemed omnipotent in M. de Rochegune's favour—at times I derived from it new strength to resist his entreaties. Our position seemed to me so exalted, that I could not make up my mind to relinquish it. But I was obliged to contrast the delights of a solitary life, with the sacrifices which the crown of purity that had been yielded to me, the sovereignty of virtue which I enjoyed, and the majesty of my self-denial, demanded. It seemed to me, at such times, insane to prefer a lofty palace of marble and gold—living there alone—to a delightful retreat, where I might hide a contented love in verdure and flowers.

Alas! women alone can understand these terrible struggles between passion and duty. Men are never subjected to them. The only alternatives with them are, to obtain, or to relinquish: whereas, it is after painful anxiety—after distressing torments only, that we grant what we so strongly desire to grant. Men feel a similar anguish when their own honour is concerned—never when ours is at stake.

M. de Rochegune was a perfect ideal specimen of courage, tenderness, and chivalrous constancy. Yet, even he had not, for a moment, hesitated between his love and the abandonment of his friends—between his passion and my shame.

These resolves—alternately weak and strong—lasted for several days. The departure of M. de Rochegune overwhelmed me, and deprived me of a great portion of my moral strength. His absence gave me a painful foretaste of the misery of my life, deprived of him. I even went so far as to give up, at last, that idea. I would have consented to anything, rather than have lost him. I only hoped to obtain from him a promise, that he would attempt to continue with me the same intercourse which we had enjoyed before! to endeavour to restrain his ardour, should we be obliged to relinquish, for a period, the pleasure of our habitual intimacy, Having no alternative, but to lose him for ever, or to follow him, what could I resolve? Should I give up to despair the being who had always proved himself so devoted—the being whom I adored; when, with one word—one single word, which, while giving to him a life of joy, should realize the ideas I had formed for my own bliss? No, never! I was now on the point of writing to him—"Return—let us fly." Hours, days, nights, passed away while I continued in this undetermined state of mind. My courage grew weaker—a fatal symptom—love grew strong; I dared no longer question my heart, so confident was I that it would reply in favour of M. de Rochegune. He had given to Madame de Richeville a very plausible reason for his departure; informing her, that some important business called him to one of his estates. In order to seclude myself, I pretended to be afflicted with a violent head-ache.

One day, Madame de Richeville, whom I had called upon as usual, told me that Emma, who had been indisposed for a few days, was now quite ill. Madame de Richeville was, therefore, more absorbed than ordinarily. I asked permission to see her, but as she was at that time asleep; I did not wish to wake her. I sent Blondeau several times to inquire about her, The day passed away quietly. On the morrow, at an early hour, Madame de Richeville entered my room. I was struck by the change of her features. "Good heaven! what is the matter with you?" said I to her.

"Emma gives me great uneasiness; I have watched all night by her side. She has just fallen asleep, and I have improved that moment to come and weep with you," she exclaimed, unable to restrain her tears, "for I dare not weep in her presence:" and the poor mother began to sob.

"But comfort yourself," said I to her; "Emma's indisposition cannot be serious. What does the physician say? there is not a more able or candid man ——"

"It is precisely because he is able and candid, that his confession of his ignorance of Emma's disorder frightens me. He can find no cause for the languor which more and more, overpowers the unfortunate child. He discovers, that she has a low and nervous fever; and confesses, that at any moment a violent crisis may occur."

"But is she in pain?"

"No, she says she is not; but perhaps it is through fear of alarming me."

"But what were her symptoms last night? Why are you more anxious this morning?

"She has been in a great state of agitation all night. Last evening, when I went to her room, she was better; her face was pale but calm: she was not asleep. I proposed to read to her from M. de Lamartine's Meditations. She thanked me eagerly, and after having listened to me, said, with that artless grace which belongs to her alone, 'Oh! what sweetness in those admirable lines! thank you, thank you, I feel better: it seems to me that I am less oppressed. But since the language of the soul does me so much good, it must be my soul that is ill.'"

"Poor child!" said I, to Madame de Richeville: "the remark was strange."

"Very strange, Matilda. And these words have awakened within me a terrible fear."

"And what fear is that?"

"During the whole night, an anxious thought has pursued me. When Emma's agitation returned with her fever—when several times her brilliant eye was fastened upon mine, it seemed to me, Matilda, that I could discover a silent reproach there."

"But explain yourself, my friend; I do not understand you."

"Without being able to ascertain how she had become informed of that fatal secret, I trembled from the fear that she suspects me to be her mother. Oh! Matilda, her soul is so innocent, that I am afraid the blow would be mortal!"

I looked at Madame de Richeville with surprise; the idea made a great impression upon me, as it solved, at once, the thoughtfulness and despondency of Emma. I did not doubt, myself, that the disclosure of the mystery would be fatal to the young girl—who felt an insurmountable horror for all criminal and shameful actions. That angelic and precious ignorance had been carefully guarded by her mother. The lessons which Emma had derived from the conversations of the friends of Madame de Richeville, had still more exalted her excessive delicacy.

With what an awful pang such a discovery would pierce the mind of Emma! What a frightful struggle would commence between the extreme susceptibility of her principles, and her warm attachment to Madame de Richeville, on learning that she had a mother, only to be forced to despise her!

"Well," said the duchess, with anguish, "are not my fears well-founded, Matilda? It is indeed awful!" she exclaimed with despair; "she knows all, she knows all—I shall no longer dare to look in her face without shame! Oh! it is a terrible punishment—to blush before my child! The wrath of God is not yet satisfied; I am very far from having yet drained my cup of bitterness!" she exclaimed with anguish.

"Do not believe that," said I to her. "Although I share your fears, I know the character of Emma, and the effect which such a revelation would produce. I think she may have some suspicions, but no certainty."

"Matilda, you wish to comfort me; for Heaven's sake! speak frankly."

"My poor friend, I address myself to your reason. You know, like myself, the heart of Emma: we have lately analyzed that frankness which she shows in all the impressions which strike her, without even foreseeing their tendency. Can you believe that it would be possible for her to conceal a secret of so much importance—to hide the agitation which it would cause? But I go farther; it might be, that the instinct of her heart has alone awakened vague suspicions which she cannot explain."

"But never mind—for although the danger is distant, it is very threatening," exclaimed Madame de Richeville. "If that secret had been only known to you and myself, and M. de Rochegune, I should have no fear: but my husband, that infamous Lugarto, and the base woman who sold to him the secret, all possess it; and at any time the blow may fall upon me."

"Do not anticipate misfortune, my friend. You may think me much of an optimist, but I am under the conviction that such suspicion must needs awaken gradually in the mind of Emma: our safety perhaps depends upon this. It will doubtless be necessary to raise with care the veil which covers her birth: and thus avoid a sudden disclosure, which I confess would be dangerous to her."

"Matilda, you are my guardian angel. Your words, filled with both affection and reason, reach at once the mind and the heart. I believe that your advice is most excellent. Yes, it may be possible, with great circumspection, to prepare the way for that revelation, and to moderate its effect. Then, Oh then, I should be too delighted to be able to say to her, 'my daughter!' But no, no: such felicity is not in reserve for me," added the duchess, sadly; "it would be too great a boon. I must expiate the guilt of Emma's birth."

"But have you not already expiated it by your repentance—redeemed it by your exemplary life?"

"My fear is, that I have adopted too blindly your opinion; I am too much interested in believing it. As soon as M. de Rochegune returns, we will converse with him respecting it. If he shares your opinion, we will think of the means of making the truth known to Emma. Kind, most kind and sincere friend," exclaimed Madame de Richeville, pressing my hands in hers; "you well deserve all the happiness which you, at length, enjoy. But, speaking of happiness; although in the misfortunes of the wicked there can be no happiness to you, do you know what has happened to Mademoiselle de Maran?"

"No; what is it?"

"She has for several days been attacked with paralysis. She was already inconsolable at the disappearance of your wicked cousin, and this last blow must be very severe. Besides, she is so universally detested, that no one visits her. No one shows the slightest politeness to her; hardly ever does any one inquire for her; and she is entirely abandoned to the care of her servants."

"I pity her, for her principal and oldest servant was the terror of my youth," said I. "It seems to me that I yet see that sinister face, rendered still more repulsive by a red birth-stain."

"As for your cousin, it is believed that she has left Paris. All searches after her by your husband have proved fruitless, and it is said that he has abandoned himself to gambling, as a distraction from grief caused by the desertion of Ursula."

I was about to relate to Madame de Richeville the adventure of the ball, and to inform her of the reasons which induced me to believe that M. de Rochegune had met Ursula there: but as my present irresolution was connected with that adventure, and as I was unwilling to allude to it, or to take counsel from any one but myself, I did not mention the subject. "What have you heard about M. de Lancry?" I asked.

"He, at first, suspected that Ursula had returned to her husband, and he immediately started for Rouvrai secretly; and he ascertained that the odious woman has not returned to M. de Secherin. Every one says that she has fled secretly to Italy, to meet Lord C***, who was very attentive to her last winter; which appears to me probable enough, as Lord C*** is very rich."

I desired to believe in the absence of Ursula; but in spite of myself, a sad presentiment told me that my cousin was not far off. I did not fear her attractions upon M. de Rochegune. I feared her rage, when she discovered that she was despised by him, which must necessarily happen, should she have the audacity to make herself known.

"I hope that you are well informed, and that Ursula has, indeed, left Paris," said I to the duchess; "but let us go and see Emma. I shall wait in your room until she is awake. To-day, I must take your place near her, particularly for the night, if she still suffers."

"No, no, my dear Matilda; you are yourself indisposed."

"I feel much better, already. If you wish to relieve me entirely, allow me to share with you the cares which you lavish upon that dear child. You know that I am not deficient in observation. I will study, watch, and examine Emma very closely; which may be of advantage in case we should find a disclosure necessary."

"I was sure you would find the best reasons in the world, for forcing me to accept this new proof of your kindness. I will take you at your word, with happiness."

"My friend, do not speak of my kindness; you confuse me. What do I not owe to you? How shall I ever repay it?"

"Matilda!"

"When I think that previous to my marriage, when you were unacquainted with me, you bestowed upon me a mother's kindness—that I received you with harshness—that I even dared to insult your praiseworthy motives—Oh, my friend! I never can forgive myself for misunderstanding you then; it will be to me a cause of everlasting remorse."

"And for me also, poor dear child! for if you had listened to me, you would have been to-day, Madame de Rochegune. I know that fate has so decreed it; that you are almost in possession of that destiny which M. de Mortagne and myself had always anticipated for you. But, my noble and courageous Matilda, I also know the immense difference which exists between the love your duty imposes, and the enchanting life you might have led with M. de Rochegune. Now that you appreciate him, as well as myself—better than myself," added she smiling, "confess that he is, above all others, the man for intimacy; and it is only in that manner that one can become acquainted with all the charms of his character; for it is only in intimacy that he consents to display his wonderful powers. Can there be conversation more touching than his—learning, at once, more universal and modest than his? What varied talents, and above all, what a character he possesses! Can there be a more mild, a more equable, a more cheerful disposition than his—that cheerfulness which expresses more the serenity of a noble soul? In short, what resources there are in his mind! Before your return, I have many times passed whole hours with him and Emma, and he always left us more astonished at the end of his conversation than we were at the commencement. One might pass days, years with him, without experiencing—I do not say a moment of *ennui*—but any dimunition of the interest and the charm which he inspires. Besides, I must confess, that in these long evenings, he constantly spoke of you; and said to us, gaily,—'I never converse better than with you; for you share my admiration of Madame de Lancry; and as she is almost always present to my mind, you comprehend my thoughts—we speak, as I might say, the same language.'"

"Just like him," said I to her, blushing; "and just like you, also my friend, who speak always the language of kindness and friendship: but let us go and see Emma," I added, for I could scarcely conceal my emotion.

"Come; I hope that she is awake," said Madame de Richeville.

I followed her, quite agitated with the strange felicity with which she had just described to me, in such glowing colours, the happiness I might have enjoyed in the society of M. de Rochegune.

One of the servants of Madame de Richeville told her, that Emma was still asleep. As this repose might be very salutary, we would not disturb it.

I had been for some time in Madame de Richeville's room, when a valet, who had recently entered my service, came to inform me that a man who had important business to communicate, was waiting for me, knowing that I was visiting the Duchess de Richeville.

"It is probably some one of your agents," said the duchess to me. "I will inform you when Emma wakes."

I returned to my room. Judge of my surprise—my terror! In my drawing-room, seated near the chimney, reading, was M. de Lancry, my husband!

CHAPTER XVI.

THE INTERVIEW.

I STOOD motionless at the door of the saloon, one hand resting on a chair to support myself, and with the other striving to repress the beating of my heart.

M. de Lancry rose, quietly laid his book on the table, placed himself in front of the fire-place, and, by a motion of his hand, invited me to approach. The expression of his countenance was harsh, sardonic—yet betrayed an expression of secret joy. I dared not advance; I even doubted whether I were awake; but presently M. de Lancry stepped toward me.

"This," said he, endeavouring to take my hand, "is a strange reception, after so long an absence."

I resisted the familiarity, and he smiled contemptuously, saying, "Come; give me your hand. What! will you not? Am I so disagreeable to you, my love?"

These words excited my anger and awakened my courage, and I advanced with a firm step into the middle of the room. "What do you want, monsieur?" said I.

"Oh," replied he, "I want many things, but it will take a long time to explain them: pray, be seated."

"Monsieur!" said I, in surprise.

"As you please," he continued, taking a chair; "stand, if you prefer it."

After reflecting a moment in silence, he raised his head and said,

"Will you not acknowledge, my dear, that I am a convenient husband, and one who exacts very little ——"

"You cannot have come here, sir," I interrupted, "to banter me in this pitiful manner! You, no doubt have a serious motive in forcing on me so disagreeable an interview—at least, sir, make it as brief as possible."

"Perhaps," said he, "you are expecting M. de Rochegune?"

I felt the colour rise to my very temples, but I made no reply.

"I shall be delighted to see him," he continued, "and he will be not less happy to meet me. Indeed, that is the advantage of having our positions so clearly defined—these virtuous and platonic relations! no one is exposed to embarrassment, neither the wife, the lover, nor the husband." Then, casting a look around the apartment, he added, "How delightfully you are established here! Everything is so quiet and secret!"

"Once more, monsieur," said I, "I ask you to inform me why you have sought this interview?"

For a moment M. de Lancry looked at me attentively, without speaking. "You are very beautiful," he said, at length, "and your fate as a deserted wife agrees with you marvellously. You play your part well, too! You betray no emotion, you utter no reproach; a hasty glance of contempt is all that my presence can draw from you—and yet I have been absent from you three years!"

"Since it is so, sir," I replied, "you may believe I am in haste to finish an interview that has neither a claim, nor an object."

"I perfectly understand your haste," said he, "although it is but little flattering to myself, and as little kind, or conjugal—for, after all, my dear lady, you are my wife. I beg you not to forget that circumstance, however insignificant it may appear to you."

"Thank Heaven!" cried I, "I had really forgotten it. Your presence was necessary to recall it to my mind."

"And my absence," he answered, "will efface it anew from your remembrance, will it not? It is very well. I understand your silence. It is as good an answer as any other. But madam, fortunately, I have not the same faculty of forgetfulness; I remember perfectly well that I am your husband, and I have come to ask your forgiveness for having so long neglected you—"

"It is needless," said I, "to ask forgiveness for a desertion which I do not lament, and which I have never regretted."

"You are right," he replied; "but my apology serves to acquit my own conscience, and introduces the subject of a favour which I have come to solicit from you."

"I hear you, sir," said I, "but as yet I comprehend nothing: you speak in enigmas."

"Indeed!" said he, with a look of malicious irony; "do I really speak in enigmas? Well! here is an explanation of one of them. I cannot live longer without you, and I beg you to put an end to the period of our separation. You perhaps think I am jesting?" he added, after a pause.

"I have nothing to reply to you," said I.

"But, madam," he continued, "I assure you I am quite serious."

"And I assure you, monsieur," I rejoined, "that this conversation has already continued too long. It is absurd to pretend that you have come to my house merely to annoy me with such trivial——"

"*Your* house!" cried he sarcastically; "and how is it your house? Come! come! you are getting a little beside yourself: it would be yielding a great deal if, as master of our household and its dependencies, by the *title universal* —mark that—the *title universal*, I permitted you to say *our* house; for you are now in *my* house."

"But, monsieur——"

"But, madam, have you read our Civil Code?—ah! you have not! You have done very wrong; for if you had read that, you would have better understood my legal rights."

Beginning, now, to comprehend the purpose of this odious visit, I coloured with anger as I replied, "It is money that you wish, is it not?"

"Madam," said he, his face contracting with rage, in return, "madam! beware——"

"And the sum you require is to be the price of your absence?" I continued: "I now regret, sir, more than ever, that you have impoverished me; for I have not money enough in my possession to purchase so inestimable a boon!"

"Ah, you now speak in sarcasms!" cried he, with increasing rage; "but," he added fiercely, "know that you are in my power: that I am here in my own house: that you are my wife—do you hear?—my wife for ever! that I can dispose of you; that I can do with you as I please: that you have not one word to say here: that I have the law on my side, and that to-morrow, or to-day, I can establish myself in this house, or carry you to another."

"I perceive," said I, "that you wish to alarm me with your threats; and, at least, your terms are well chosen, for the thought of what you threaten would be worse than death—the thought that I should be condemned to pass the rest of my life with you! But you do not seem to be aware, that your conduct has been so infamous that you have forfeited the legal rights of which you boast?"

"Ah, really! I have lost my rights over you?"

"Monsieur," I continued, "as your visit can have no other object than to obtain money from me, and as, unfortunately, you have already deprived me of everything, but the bare necessaries of life, it is needless to prolong this conference."

"Hold!" cried he, with a stern composure, even more terrifying than his rage; "if I were yet capable of pity, you, poor fool! would inspire me with it. Mark me! I have had enough of this babbling. In speaking of the infamy of my conduct, you referred to my love for Ursula, and my relations with her, did you not? Very well. I am by law entitled to have, if I please, ten mistresses; provided I do not introduce them under the conjugal roof—and I defy you to prove that Ursula has ever set foot in my house."

"The question is not as to Ursula alone!"

"Ah, you wish to speak of all my indiscretions? I will repeat to you, what I said on another occasion, apropos to your fancy for a hospital, that, by law, the right to dispose of *our* property, rests solely in me. Whether I use that right wisely or unwisely, no person has the power to control me: I am responsible to no one. *Now*, I hope my rights and my position are clearly explained."

"Very clearly, and————"

"It is my wish that you should return, and henceforth remain with me. I will give you eight-and-forty hours to make your preparation. This is Friday; on Sunday morning, I will come for you. I could take you with me this evening—nay, this very moment—but that would not be consistent with my other arrangements. In the meantime, as you might take a sudden fancy to go from here before Sunday, I shall leave some one on whom I can depend, to keep an eye on you, so that I may know where to find you. As for your platonic lover, you will tell him, from me, that I can dispense with his visits; unless he should desire to visit me, personally, and then—then—the result does not concern you."

"You speak with delightful candour," said I, "and I will endeavour to reply with equal frankness. Make yourself easy on one subject. I shall not take the trouble to fly from this house, nor will I ever voluntarily leave it with you. If I am compelled to go hence, it will be by force alone. No one but a magistrate can order such force to be employed; and when justice shall mediate between you and me, the question will speedily be decided."

"Ha! ha! ha! you are a very acute lawyer, madam, but I greatly fear that you may lose your first cause. You wish to say, that you will demand a separation? I have thought of that, too; but there is this difficulty for you: that which might make a wife desire a separation, will not always suffice to obtain it. Let us see—we will arrange the pleadings: you would say to me, *Ursula*, I should reply, *Rochegune*. Public opinion would accuse me—it would accuse you, also; and it would send us back more firmly married than before; thus you perceive the equality of our positions."

"Nay, sir, do not aggravate injury by such comparisons."

"Indeed I must—it is so amusing! Observe: if an old man in his dotage, his bigot of a wife, or a nun in the guise of Madame de Richeville, should attest to the honesty and propriety of your communications with Rochegune, you imagine that your case would be made good. Very well. I, on my part, will claim to be a very hero of Platonism; and, on an emergency, Mademoiselle de Maran and her friends will come in a mass, and testify to the angelic purity of my relations with Ursula. On my word, it would be an amusing trial! but all this is for the future. As to the present, pending the result of this trial, a magistrate, otherwise denominated a police-officer, will require you to repair immediately to your husband's residence—you dear little wandering lamb!"

"I do not believe that!"

"Bah! and with that answer—with the omnipotent argument of your incredulity—you await the magistrate?"

"My argument and answer are far more simple: I shall place before the magistrate the proofs of your criminal communication with Madame Secherin, and of your infamous disposition of my property."

"The *proofs*, say you? Umph? The oath, probably, of the Prince d'Hericourt, or an affidavit from the beautiful and penitent duchess?"

"Better proofs than those."

"Ah! a complaint from poor Monsieur Secherin, or from the mother, 'a lady of the family of Providence,' as Mademoiselle de Maran calls her."

"Be cautious of what you say," cried I; "there may be something providential in the sad destiny of that family—" (for I could not repress the recollection of the deadly threat with which M. Secherin had menaced M. de Lancry)—

"There *should* be something providential there," answered de Lancry; for poor M. Secherin appears to me singularly *predestined*——"

"Sir," said I, interrupting him in turn, "I am uncertain whether to be most angered or disgusted; but this scene must be concluded. The proofs, in virtue of which I shall demand, provisionally, a retirement to the convent of the *Sacre Cœur*, while the trial of our separation is in progress——"

"The proofs, Madam?—well; and what are they?"

"The proofs are letters, written by your own hand. to one of your friends in Brittany, concerning your intrigue with Ursula."

As I pronounced these words, M. de Lancry entirely lost his self-possession. Anger, shame, rage and hatred convulsed his features; and, seizing me violently in his arms, he cried fiercely:

"Wo! wo to you, if you have read those letters!"

My courage now rose to the highest point, and disengaging myself from his brutal embrace, I replied:

"I have read those letters!"

"You have read them! Where are they? where are they, I say!"

"In my possession."

"Ha!" he exclaimed, looking around, as if to discover where they could be secreted, "this is an infamous piece of treachery, and he shall answer it with his life!" Then, clasping his hand on his forehead, and stamping with his foot, he continued, "Do not again say that you have read those letters: if you do, I will not answer for myself——"

At this moment I rang the bell violently, and my footman entered the room.

"Wait in the antechamber a moment," said I, "I shall want you presently."

These words recalled M. de Lancry to himself. He took a few hurried steps across the floor, and then approached me, saying, "How came you in possession of those letters? By heaven! I will know, and on the instant!"

"It concerns you little to know how I obtained them," said I, calmly; "it is sufficient that you know I have them; and that, if you compel me, I shall make use of them."

"Yes!" cried he bitterly, "and, doubtless, you have already done so! you have exhibited them everywhere among your friends, to show how Ursula has abused and distressed me, have you not? What a triumph for you and your silly friends! how you and they must have laughed at my tortures? Was it not ridiculous?—to ruin myself for a woman who despised me! Tell me," he added, with a convulsive laugh, "how many copies of these letters have you and Rochegune made? How many are now in circulation?"

"I have the misfortune and the disgrace to bear your name," I answered, disgusted at this unworthy imputation: "that fate is sufficiently humiliating; you need not aggravate it, by suspecting me of an act of which I am incapable."

"This is no answer: who sent you those letters? how long have you had them?"

"On reflection, I see no reason for not informing you. The first two were brought to me in a parcel containing a bouquet of flowers, similar to those that M. Lugarto once offered me in your behalf; and I, therefore, have reason to suppose that he sent those letters. How he obtained them, I know not. The other letters, I received through the post."

"I no longer doubt," said he, "that Lugarto is secretly here. My informer did not deceive me; he must have seen him. As for the others, I sent them to the post by one of my servants, in whom I have entire confidence; and, what is more, the person to whom they were addressed, has replied as if she had received them."

"This would not be the first time," said I, "that M. Lugarto has counterfeited your writing, and bribed your servants."

"Yes, yes, that is it!" he muttered; "but why does he hide himself? Oh! if I could find him! As to his motive—if it was to augment to hatred the aversion which I already feel toward you, he has succeeded—do you hear? succeeded even beyond his wishes. Death and hell!—to think that you! you! should have looked into my very heart, and read my most secret thoughts, and should now avow it! But you do not consider, that my detestation of you will augment in proportion to the advantage you may gain over me, by reason of these letters. Ha! those letters!—bring them to me! Do you hear? Bring them to me this moment?"

"Your threats, sir," said I, "will make me guard them more carefully than ever!"

"Hold! Matilda! Do not push me to extremity. Since you have read the letters, you must have seen that my soul is steeped in hatred—yet that is gentleness itself—compared to what you are now likely to witness. Once more, I warn you—do not drive me to——"

"Let us live—as of late we have done—separately; and these letters shall remain in oblivion."

"I tell you, it is necessary that you should live with me—more necessary than ever before!"

"And I tell you that I shall employ all possible means, to save myself from so terrible a calamity!"

"Matilda! you are a fool! In spite of these letters, you will, in the first instance, be compelled to await, with me, and in my own house, the result of the trial."

"We shall see, monsieur, whether, with this presumptive evidence against you, I cannot be permitted to retire to a provisional asylum;—to a convent, for example. In any event, I shall submit to my destiny."

"This is your final decision?"

"This is my final decision. However, for your sake, as well as my own—for I confess that I shrink from exposing the vileness of your past life—I will make one suggestion. Your persisting in your present demand, can be nothing but a threat; or, a means of forcing me to consent to something for your own interest—perhaps, you wish me to relinquish the annuity which you first sanctioned, and have subsequently reduced. If that is it—to spare you the shame of the odious part you are playing, I consent——"

"If you should load me with gold, it would not relieve my present embarrassment. No! I will never renounce my rights over you; and, but for the emergency in which I am now placed, it should not be the day after to-morrow, but this very hour that I would force you to go with me!"

"What intemperate folly is this!" cried I. "It is impossible that we should ever be reconciled. You, yourself, know this. You abhor me, almost as much as I despise you. What, then, would you have? There is some terrible mystery in this—but, thank God! I am no longer defenceless: I have friends, now, who know how to protect me!"

At this moment the clock struck three.

"Three o'clock already!" exclaimed he, impatiently: "I must go, then. For the last time, do you refuse to go with me, the day after to-morrow?"

"I do."

"I warn you!—beware!"

"I refuse; and I will yield to nothing but force."

"You are indifferent to the disturbance and scandal of such a proceeding?"

"I do not know what you mean to do with me; and I believe you capable of anything."

"Yes! yes!" answered he wildly; "I shall be capable of anything and everything, to compel you to go with me; for, it is of more consequence to me than life itself!" Then, as if fearing he had said too much, he smiled bitterly, and added: "It is, at least, of as much consequence as my happiness, my tranquillity, sweet Matilda; for many happy days are yet in store for us: therefore, on Sunday, at noon——" And he rushed from the room.

After his departure, the factitious and feverish excitement, which had hitherto sustained me, failed me entirely; and for a time I stood in a stupor, without the power to collect even my thoughts; for this terrible scene had entirely disordered them, and it required some moments of tranquillity, to enable me to estimate the force of M. de Lancry's threats, and his power of carrying them into execution. As to his motives for seeking a reconciliation with me, I could not divine them; but I was not the less certain that they were evil. Nevertheless, I was but little disturbed by that consideration; for it was my unalterable resolution not to live with him. The question remained, whether he could compel me to do so.

My counsellors had often urgently entreated me to demand a separation, not doubting the facility of obtaining it; but hitherto, I had shrunk from the scandal of such a proceeding; yet, it had never entered into their thoughts nor mine, that M. de Lancry would have the hardihood to insist on our reunion. It seemed to me impossible that, while such letters as I possessed were in existence, I should be forced to reside, even temporarily, with M. de Lancry. Still, I had seen so many instances of the injustice which the technicalities of the law metes out to females, that I was not entirely confident in my own position. I therefore wrote immediately to an eminent lawyer, who had superintended the affairs of Madame de Richeville, begging him to come and confer with me as soon as possible.

After deliberating on the interview that had just taken place, I saw that its result was rather fortunate than otherwise; for it terminated all uncertainty as to my relations with M. de Rochegune. M. de Lancry had just shown himself under an aspect so repulsive; he had so entirely forfeited all claim to my consideration and respect; that I was indignant at the very thought of his conduct being, for a moment, placed in comparison with my own: and there was now between us so wide a gulf of separation, that I wondered at, and contemned my previous scruples.

The course which I had to pursue, and which I now *resolved* to pursue, was perfectly clear: namely, to sue for a separation from M. de Lancry; and, that obtained, to follow the wishes of my heart—seek some quiet retreat, await M. de Rochegune, and devote to him the remainder of my life. A legal separation is a kind of divorce; and I should thereafter consider myself entirely free from any restraint concerning my marriage. It would, doubtless have been more heroic in me to continue in the path of self-denial to which I had hitherto condemned myself; but it seemed very silly to carry my notions of duty to that extent.

I should never, of my own accord, have sought a separation; and probably, left to myself, I should for ever have retained my scruples: but M. de Lancry had placed me in my present position, which, although it had exposed me to false imputations, I nevertheless welcomed with joy on account of the new relations to which it would lead with M. de Rochegune; for to him I would now devote the bright future, which I should otherwise have sacrificed.

On no former occasion was my spirit more firm, more clear, more decided, than after this violent scene; nor ever did I before form a more prompt resolution. I overlooked nothing, and I shrank from no obstacle in the trial before me. I fancied myself compelled to live with M. de Lancry until the termination of the suit, and I felt confident of enduring that ordeal with firmness, sustained as I was, by the certainty of the happiness that would follow it.

Nay, I went farther than this. I imagined my cause to be lost, and M. de Lancry to be the master of my fate. But, even then, the wrong to myself would be so flagrant—public opinion, confirmed by such a verdict, would be so outrageously unjust—that I would never consider myself bound by its decisions. I would confide my hopes and my life to the tenderness of M. de Rochegune. Without hesitation—without fear, before my God and under his protection, I would appeal from the judgment of men to his supreme tribunal, the last refuge and the last hope of the oppressed.

Being firm in my resolve—as well to engage myself irrevocably with M. de Rochegune, as to seek his counsel and support, under these grave circumstances, I hastily wrote him these words:

"Come to me; come quickly, my dear friend! This time, it shall be for ever! I am always yours: my very life belongs to you."

I called Blondeau, and said to her, "Go to the hotel Rochegune; give this letter to the steward, and tell him, from me, to dispatch it to his master by a courier."

Blondeau had hardly left the room, when one of Madame de Richeville's women entered, alarmed, and in tears.

"For Heaven's sake! madam," cried she, "come with me! Mademoiselle Emma is dying, and Madame de Richeville in a state of delirium!"

CHAPTER XVII.

A CONSULTATION.

How dreadful a spectacle presented itself to my sight!

The minutest details of that scene are indelibly engraved on my memory. The hangings of Emma's chamber were of white muslin, as were also the curtains and draperies of her bed, and the half-closed shutters admitted but a feeble light into the apartment. It was difficult to distinguish the pale and angelic face of Emma, surrounded as it was in the plaits of her blond hair, and enveloped in a veil of snowy whiteness; her large eyes, almost devoid of meaning, were nearly hidden by her long eye-lashes, which threw a shadowy transparency on her cheeks, hollowed by disease; at times, her lips moved feebly, and her hands were crossed over her bosom. I had not seen her for two days, and I was shocked at the change she had undergone. Madame de Richeville was leaning over her bed, and held her in a convulsive embrace, covering with tears and kisses her eyes, her cheeks, her forehead, and her hair. One of her women, choking with sobs, leaned on the bed and held a cup in her hand.

"Good Heaven! what is the matter?" cried I, running to Madame de Richeville, and kneeling by her side.

She made no answer, but redoubled her caresses.

I took Emma's hand: it was hot and dry, and her hard breathing seemed to denote that she was in great pain, and this symptom chiefly alarmed Madame de Richeville.

"Have you sent for the physician?" said I, in a low voice to the maid.

"Oh, no! madam!" she replied; "the attack of Mademoiselle was so alarming, that we did not know what we were doing."

"Give me the cup then," said I, "and go immediately for M. Gérard."

The girl disappeared in a moment; and meantime, Madame de Richeville, amid sobs and tears, cried out: "Emma! Emma! my child! you don't hear me! Oh, God! she does not even see me! My child! I beseech you to drink this!" Then, turning to take the cup, she saw me "Ah!" she continued, pointing toward Emma, with a look of despair, "I foresaw this so truly! She is lost—lost—and I shall not survive her!"

"Hush! my dear madam;" said I, "for her sake and your own!"

"She will take nothing from my hand! and perhaps this might save her!" and so saying, she put a spoon toward the lips of the girl, who gently turned away her head. "I told you so!" continued Madame de Richeville; "she knows all—she despises me—she hates me! Oh! my God! she will die cursing her mother!" and, completely losing her reason, Madame de Richeville wrung her hands in despair—her sobs became convulsive, until they suddenly ceased—her tears stopped, and she fell down in a nervous fit. The women bore her out, and I remained with Emma. Almost at the same moment Doctor Gérard arrived.

He had already learned from the maid, that Emma had been greatly agitated during the night. In the morning, she was a little drowsy; recovering from that, she looked steadily and for a long time at Madame de Richeville; she then uttered some unintelligible words during the delirium consequent on the increase of the fever; and after this, fell into a state of insensibility, in which she now lay.

The doctor approached the bed, looked attentively at Emma, and listened to her breathing. I watched his countenance, and observed that he looked grave and anxious—presently he said to me:

"Madam, I wish to speak with you alone, for a moment, since Madame de Richeville unfortunately is in no condition to listen to me."

I made a sign, and the attendants withdrew.

"What is the matter, doctor?"

"She is in great danger."

"In the name of Heaven! is there no hope?"

"I am afraid not. Science is too weak to combat moral causes which produce physical reactions. It is in vain to strive with the effects of disease when the seat of the malady is beyond our reach. Considering, therefore, the alarming state of Mademoiselle—I ought—it is necessary——"

"Doctor," said I, perceiving his hesitation, "I am the most intimate friend of Madame de Richeville: I love Emma as a sister; and I can answer any question——"

"For that reason, madam, I begged you to send out the women: what I wish to say is very confidential." After a pause he continued: "I have given attention to Mademoiselle, both at the *Sacre Cœur*, and in this house. Her character has appeared to me to be romantic, her imagination vivid, her mind susceptible, and her ingenuousness perfect: I think I am not deceived in her."

"You are not, indeed: with Madame de Richeville and myself, she is always frank, and expresses herself with almost involuntary freedom, although she is decided———"

"That is what Madame de Richeville has often told me; and this assurance, coming from one who knows Mademoiselle so intimately, suffices to remove certain suspicions which I have entertained, and which I regret I did not sooner communicate to you."

"How is that?"

"I will presently tell you. In my opinion, the cause of her disease is altogether mental; she has, for a long time, been subject to frequent reveries and fits of langour; but these symptoms have been serious for only a few weeks; dangerous for but a few days, and eminently alarming only since yesterday. Now, what I have yet to say, madam, is a very delicate matter; yet it is a matter of life and death to this child."

"Say on—say on."

"Madam, you, who see her every day, who live in intimacy with her—have you no reason to suspect her of a desire—of a thwarted hope?"

"No, Sir; none whatever. Why do you think so?"

"The symptoms of her disease have all the character of those ailments caused by the disappointments of the heart. I have often been on the point of expressing my doubts to you—but the duchess and yourself have so frequently spoken of her extraordinary frankness, that you in part expelled the belief from my mind."

After a little reflection, and remembering nothing that could justify the doctor's suspicions, I replied:

"I cannot think that Emma has been thwarted in love, and I am surprised that you should entertain such an idea; especially, if you knew, as I do, that Emma's ingenuousness and simplicity are almost infantine. If she were affected by such a passion, it would be impossible for her to hide it from Madame de Richeville and myself."

"And yet, madam, this infantine ingenuousness and simplicity, far from removing my convictions, greatly confirms them. I will explain. It is possible that she is herself ignorant of her own passion. In recollecting her confidential communications with you, madam, can you not recall some circumstances, insignificant in themselves, which, interpreted in the light I suggest, might explain this mystery?"

"No; the more I reflect, the less does such a thing seem possible. Yet, without explaining myself entirely on a secret which is not my own, and asking your indulgence for my reserve; I ought to tell you, that Madame de Richeville and myself have feared that Emma has made a discovery of great importance to herself—a discovery relative to her family—and that the poor child has been greatly afflicted by it."

The doctor seemed to be greatly embarrassed. What I had just told him seemed to make no impression on him; he bent down his head with an air of doubt, stepped again to Emma's bedside, listened to her breathing, which seemed to be a little less painful, felt her pulse, and said:

"She is ill, very ill: her disease is mental, and a mental remedy can alone be of service to her. There are wonderful instances on record, of persons recalled to life merely by the presence of those whom the patient longed to see; and—I will not disguise it from you, madam—some experiment of that sort is indispensible to save the life of this young lady."

"You terrify me!"

"Nevertheless, madam, it is but too true; and I must say even more, if it is necessary, to convince you of her danger. Indeed, nothing but that consideration would induce me to make the singular disclosure which I have yet to make."

"What disclosure? I must entreat you, sir, to keep me no longer in this suspense."

"Some person—to me unknown—left at my house this morning, a parcel, containing ten bank notes of a thousand francs each; and this letter, which, however embarrassing such a proceeding may prove, I must read to you; it is in these words:

'*This sum of ten thousand francs is presented to you, on condition that you inform Madame de Lancry, that Mademoiselle Emma de Lostanges, is dying for love of the Marquis de Rochegune.*' "

It is with certain mental, as with certain physical excitements; a sudden blow strikes us, we fall, and for a time are lost in that total unconsciousness; then, our first sensation, after a partial recovery, is vague remembrance of great and imminent peril. Thus it was with me, on receiving this astounding intelligence: I became instantly insensible to all surrounding objects. The darkness of the room prevented the physician from perceiving how greatly I was affected, and he went on to say:

"I need not tell you, madam, that I immediately sent the ten thousand francs to the treasurer of the hospital. I then reflected, that I might perhaps render an important service by revealing to Madame de Richeville, or yourself, a fact, or at least a strong suspicion, which I have for some time entertained; together with the reasons which have hitherto induced me to conceal it. I arrived at my conclusions, solely from my communications with Mademoiselle Emma, not from any knowledge of, or acquaintance with, the object of her attachment, for I know M. de Rochegune only by name; and I give you my word that if I had not received this letter, I should nevertheless have this morning communicated my fears, or rather my convictions, to the duchess, when I found the young lady in this alarming situation. Now, madam, do you think that the object of this unconscious, or thwarted passion, is M. de Rochegune? Does she often see him?"

"Almost every day."

"And do you think he reciprocates her affection, or that he is aware of its existence?"

"I think not—I think not—" then, after a moment's pause, I added, in an altered tone, "This child's life, you say, is in danger, and some hidden passion is the cause?"

"I believe so, Madam, on my honour; and I believe the young lady has but one chance of recovery—which is, to be assured that her love for M. de Rochegune is reciprocated by him."

"I am deeply interested in the child's health—and—I have to beg of you one favour, of the utmost importance——"

"Speak it, madam."

"Give me the letter, and promise that you will tell no one—no one—that you ever received it."

The doctor reflected a moment, as if to assure himself that he was not acting hastily, and replied:

"I should have nothing with which to reproach myself: the poor will have the benefit of the money; my conscience approves the disolosure I have made to you; I see no good reason why I should refuse to give the letter and the promise."

"I heartily thank you."

"Consider, madam," added the doctor, approaching Emma's bedside—"consider, that you now take on yourself a grave responsibility. I have just seen the duchess, and she is at this moment in no condition to think or act for her young kinswoman. The fate of the young lady is in your hands, and whatever you have to do for her, you must do at once, and with great caution: her fever is diminishing," he added, feeling her pulse; "she is a little more tranquil. Therefore, if she can understand you—if her senses are not yet entirely gone—there is a hope of saving her."

"You are right!" cried I, bitterly; "it is a grave responsibility that now rests on me——"

"I think," interrupted the doctor, "that I see a tear on her eyelid, which is a favourable symptom. In order that she may understand you, speak, at first indirectly, of M. de Rochegune: observe carefully, the effect which his name will produce on her; watch her countenance ——"

"Yes—yes—I will observe."

"If his name produce any emotion, no matter how slight, you may suggest the hope of her soon seeing him. Is he here?"

"No; he has been absent several days."

"Indeed! and it is several days, since Mademoiselle has been growing worse: his absence must have caused this crisis. You can speak, then, of his approaching return—of his pleasure at seeing her again. It may be, that he is aware of her passion, and partakes it: at any rate, the first care is to save her."

"Yes—yes—we must save her," said I, mechanically,

"If your words should produce any unexpected result, you might, perhaps, suggest a remote hope of her marrying M. de Rochegune: if there be any obstacle to such a union, she may discover that at a later period, and with less risk than at present:—for this crisis will not return."

"Are you sure of that?"

"There is no doubt of it. If by this means she should be restored to life, she can remain in hope until her health is established. Happiness is a marvellous medicine! in mental maladies, it operates like magic. Do not despond, madam. I dare not fully assure you of the result, but be of good courage: your responsibility is great, but no one can discharge, better than you, a task of such difficulty and delicacy. You are the friend of Madame de Richeville—almost a sister to Emma—and the means of recalling her to life could not be intrusted to one more capable and more devoted. I will return in the evening;" and, after writing some prescriptions, he departed.

At the same time, one of Madame de Richeville's women came to inform me, that the duchess still remained in a state of great nervous excitement. I told her that Emma had fallen asleep, and she might return to her mistress.

And now I was left alone—alone with this unhappy child—who, innocently and unconsciously, had inflicted on me the severest blow that I was capable of receiving.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE DISCLOSURE.

I NOW understood certain things, hitherto inexplicable, in the conversation and conduct of Emma. A thousand recollections crowded upon me. For example, she manifested great emotion on seeing a snow-storm; and the snow was once nearly being M. de Rochegune's winding-sheet. I remembered, too, that she had recently shown evidences of jealousy toward myself; and the fact, that she had at first betrayed such a feeling, and afterward overcome it, seemed to prove the force of her affection.

Besides, was not such an attachment, on her part, probable?—nay, inevitable? To be constantly in company with such a man as M. de Rochegune, and daily to hear him praised and admired—how could she help loving him? At one moment, I bitterly accused Madame de Richeville of imprudence—the poor unhappy mother! Again I denounced M. Lugarto, with all possible execration—"Oh!" thought I, "he is revenging himself for the wrong he has already done me! and he has taken his revenge in a manner cruelly atrocious!"

"But how could he who never saw Emma, have discovered a secret which was unknown to Madame de Richeville and myself?—a secret that Doctor Gérard only suspected? The duchess thought she had trustworthy servants: has Lugarto corrupted them? Besides, if these servants were disposed to be dishonest, how should they have read the secrets of Emma better than her mother and myself?

The more I reflected, the more I was bewildered. I was constantly occupied with my own attachment; Madame de Richeville herself took a lively interest in it; some remark or action must naturally have apprised us of Emma's passion; yet, in fact, such a thought was a thousand leagues off from our wildest imagination.

Could Emma have had a confidante among Madame de Richeville's women? Such a thing would be inconsistent with her character; and the women all seemed to be devoted to the duchess—but were they, in fact, thus devoted? Gold is a powerful corrupter, and M. Lugarto was very rich.

These reflections appeared calm, cold, and almost puerile, under the circumstances in which I was placed: but they did not prevent me from being, at the same time, assailed by the most painful fears for Emma.

As the eye of heaven comprehends every thing at once, so my thoughts comprised, in one mental glance, a world of misery, and all the accessories of despair—from causes the most serious, to effects the most insignificant. Previously, I could not have believed that such an astonishing annihilation of my hopes was possible. It seemed to be supernatural: it was like counteracting a miracle: the reality was so palpable—I could not credit my senses. Against the evidence of facts, I brought reasons which appeared as conclusive, and as irresistible as the laws of nature.

"No! no!" said I, "Emma must not love M. de Rochegune; such a passion would cause her death, or my lasting misery; and, I do not wish her to die—nor will I be miserable for ever! It is impossible for me to relinquish my own hopes, and return to M. de Lancry—it cannot be that I am destined to attain so nearly to happiness, and then to see it thus snatched from my grasp—I cannot abandon myself to a future so terrible—so wretched."

The realization of such misery seemed to me like a horrible dream; such an accumulation of woe upon the head of one created being, seemed beyond the power of human endurance. Heaven could not so have decreed it; it was condemning too easily, and too surely, an immortal soul. I rebelled against the merciless cruelty of such a fate. I asked, what I had done to merit such a fearful retribution? and a voice—whence I know not—a voice severe, yet paternal, thus answered me:

"And this child, this beautiful creature, who lies in agony before you, what has she done? yet she is dying. Her soul is so pure that she is ignorant, even of the love which is destroying her; she has revealed it to no one; she has languished, she has suffered, but she has not complained—she never will complain, and yet—she is dying.

"Like the flowers which wither when the sun is obscured, and do not know that there is a sun, she lacks the love which gives life to her, and she withers away. She seeks no sophistry to justify her love; she is young and free; she loves one young and free like herself; her passion is in conformity with the laws both of God and man; she is only sixteen, and yet—she is dying.

"Close your eyes, poor child! your young love shall be buried with you. Fear nothing—the world is as ignorant of your passion as you are: when people shall see those little hands, pale and attenuated, crossed on your breast, they will say, that your instinctive sensitiveness sought to hide your very thoughts in your bosom—as if they could read them through the pure transparency of your soul! Sleep! sleep your last sleep, poor child!"

I found myself melting in my own despite. I looked at the dying girl: night was approaching, and her beautiful face, pale as alabaster, seemed radiant with light in the midst of the shades that enveloped it. She slept lightly, and the expression of her countenance was full of suffering, patience, and resignation.

"Oh God! oh God!" I cried, falling on my knees, "she is indeed very miserable; but at least, she is ignorant of the cause of her sorrow, and she will die without regret; and I—I shall not live in hopeless despair!"

Then, reflecting what a horrible picture was shadowed forth by those words, I checked my sobs and asked pardon of Emma for conceiving it. In my remorse for having entertained a thought so unworthy, I rose to a heroic resolution. Again I heard the mysterious voice, and its tones thrilled the most generous emotions of my soul:

"Be of good courage, poor lady! your cross is indeed heavy, but take one step more and you will gain the summit of your Calvary. Then, from the height of your sublime sacrifice—like your Saviour, from the elevation of his cross, placed between men and God—you will contemplate below you this child whom you will have saved, and her mother also will bless you. As for the man so worthy of you, who also loves you so worthily, you will say, while hiding your tears, *if he knew*——

"Take courage! it needs resolution more than human to assume voluntarily the bloody crown of an unknown martyr—but what an ineffable balm will the consolations of your conscience shed on your wounds!

"You do no not know, lady, what it is to gain, by virtue of sacrifices, *the right to weep over your own fate.*

"You know not the sweetness of those holy and fruitful tears: you know not the holy voluptuousness of grief. You know not what one can at once endure and enjoy in saying, while the heart is breaking, the eyes drowned in tears, and the lips quivering with sobs—*I am miserable, dreadfully miserable! but at least, they are happy—they for whom I suffer so much!*

"Be proud of that love to which you have sacrificed yourself; be proud of it! it is your first—your only love! See with what sentiments it inspires you! How different are your thoughts now, from the jealousy you formerly entertained toward Ursula!

"What moves you in Emma's behalf? the most elevated and touching aspirations. She dies for the love of one who is dear to you; and you are about to force her to acknowledge her passion. You are about to sacrifice, for her, your very heaven; and yet you feel toward Emma, nothing but pity and tenderness!

"Yes, Matilda! your lover assures you that your passion is noble, and from it will spring a season of sublime examples of glorious devotedness!

"You once submitted passively to suffer in an unworthy cause, but the hour has now come for you both to suffer and to act in a cause the most holy. Guard well your crown of virtue; be true to yourself, and to those who love you; sacrifice yourself for a child as innocent and pure as the angels; save her from death; toil for her happiness. Be of good cheer; the eye of God is on you, and he will smile on you throughout eternity!"

Still, while I was thus urged to resist my own culpable inclinations, and to reject the unworthy suggestions of my own heart, I strove, on the other hand, to shut my eyes to all argument.

I was weary of my misery.

Why should I extend to this poor child a hope which M. de Rochegune can never ratify? It is I whom he loves, and his passion is as deep and imperishable as my own; this terrible sacrifice, therefore, so disastrous to me, would be of no service to Emma.

In the midst of these reflections, Emma made a slight movement, turned her head feebly toward me, and looked at me with a deep sigh. I remember that look still—so sweet, so sad, and so resigned! It seemed to implore my compassion—it asked for life, for happiness.

After looking at me for a moment, she closed her eyes, a slight colour overspread her features, and two big tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Emma!" said I, tenderly, "what is the matter, my child? are you in pain?"

"Yes," she answered feebly, without opening her eyes; "I love you—yet your presence makes me unhappy; do not be angry with me—the dying need pity."

"What do you say, my poor child? Do not have such thoughts; you only afflict me, and your friend, Madame de Richeville."

"I know very well that I shall die—God told me so in a dream."

"What dream?"

"A very strange one: I dare not tell it to you."

"I beseech you, do tell me!"

"I dreamed I was dying, and I felt within me a power that would raise me to heaven: then I thought I heard a voice, saying, '*must she die? must she indeed die?*'"

"And to whom did this voice speak, my child?"

"Oh! it was the fever that suggested such thoughts—they are very foolish."

"But to whom did the voice say, *must she die?*"

"To a lady—a lady whose face I did not see," answered Emma, hastily.

I understood her meaning; she sought to deceive me; it was myself that she had seen in her dream.

"And the lady——" said I.

"She made no reply; and then the voice said, "*Emma, you must die?*"

Then, probably, reproaching herself for the impression which she might have taken against me, and returning to her natural manner, she opened her eyes, and looked at me with such fondness and such ingenuous regret, that I could not restrain my tears.

Emma leaned toward me, took my hand in hers, and raised it to her lips, which were very cold; then pressing it on her bosom, she said, "It seems to me that your hand warms my heart—it is all the time frozen."

"You love me then, Emma?"

"Yes, now—— After my second mother, there is nothing in the world I love so much as you."

"Is there no one that you love more than me?"

"No one. I could wish to be like you in everything—to be yourself."

"And yet sometimes you hate me," said I, quickly.

She pressed my hand again to her heart, and I felt its feeble pulsations quicken, as she answered, with a deep sigh—

"How you pain me by saying that! I protest that I love you. Sometimes I feel emotions on seeing you, that I cannot repress; but I have found out the cause," and she tried to smile again.

"Indeed! what is it?"

"Something in my heart, which tells me that in my heedlessness, I have sometimes given you pain! and when I have done so, I have felt such remorse that I was afraid to approach you; but your kindness would soon dispel my fear, and I would throw myself into your arms as before."

Why should I not have been subdued in listening to Emma, as she was forcing herself to explain the jealousy which she condemned, and of the nature of which she was still ignorant?

"You believe me, do you not?" she added. "I affirm that I do not hate you, and on the eve of standing in the presence of God, I could not speak falsely."

"You speak constantly of dying, my child," said I; "are you not unhappy at the thought of leaving those you love—of leaving life?"

"Oh, yes!" she said, "very unhappy to leave you and Madame de Richeville; but life, no! I do not regret losing that!"

"And why?"

"Because—without reason—without one single reason, I am always miserable: everything grows gloomy around me; all my aspirations are wrecked on some invisible obstacle."

"But, before you were thus unhappy."

"Oh! before that," cried she, clasping her hands, and raised her eyes to heaven; "before that, I wished to live always! Time flew with me, like a vision of joy—my thoughts were so light—I was so happy—so happy that everything about me was radiant with sunshine and hope. I believed, even, that I should discover my mother, although I knew she was dead."

"And were you equally happy at the convent?"

"I was happy in a different way at the convent. I enjoyed, there, the friendship of my companions, the kindness of Madame de Richeville; the joy and the sorrow I experienced there, I could understand: but the other happiness was brighter, more glowing, and I felt, without comprehending it; as I do, also, the misery by which it is followed!"

"But, perhaps it was the hope of leaving the convent that made you so contented there?"

"No. I regretted leaving my companions; and I saw Madame de Richeville there as I do here."

"Try to recollect at what time the happiness commenced which so changed the tenor of your life—which gave an object to your existence—which surrounded you—did it not?—with such light and joy."

"Oh! yes! yes! it did indeed! I felt——"

"This happiness commenced," continued I, trembling with emotion—"commenced, did it not, after the return—of—M. de Rochegune to Paris—when you saw him every day?"

Emma looked at me with an expression of ingenuous rapture;—her heart beat violently; and she exclaimed, with a burst of joy, that comprised at once surprise, recognition, and ecstacy—

"Yes! yes! that is it! My God! that is it!"

"And your unhappiness"—I almost shrieked—"did it commence soon after my arrival?"

Despair must have given to my face and my words an expression of reproach both terrible and cruel; for Emma half-raised herself from the bed, threw herself into my arms, hid her streaming eyes in my bosom, and cried—"forgive me! forgive me!"

She embraced me for a moment with convulsive force, but the next instant I perceived that she was fainting. I replaced her, in great haste and terror, and ran for a smelling-bottle. A mortal paleness overspread her countenance, her cheeks were livid, and her hands as cold as marble.

The salts which I held to her face did not reanimate her; I placed my hand on her heart, but it had ceased to beat. I placed my cheek to her half-opened lips, but I could feel no breath: I thought she was dead! It was a dreadful moment! I fell on my knees, crying—

"Forgive me! oh God! forgive me! Restore her to life! I have promised to sacrifice myself for her;—to do everything in my power for her happiness, as if she were my sister—my child. I vow to thee, Father in Heaven! that I will make this sacrifice, if it should cost me my life! Oh! grant that I may not have killed her! Oh! Heaven! let her not die from any act of mine!"

After a few dreadful moments, during which I watched, to discover in Emma the least motion, or the slightest breath, God heard my prayer! She sighed faintly; her blood, checked for an instant, resumed its circulation, and she was alive again.

I had devoted myself!—for me, all was consummated, all was finished!

It behoved me, now, to bury my love in my heart as in a sepulchre; to enlighten this poor child, and to endeavour to restore her to life by means of hope. I could no longer doubt that she was dying of love and jealousy.

But he—he for whom she would have died—how could I detach him from myself?—how could I interest him in Emma's fondness and bring him to reciprocate it?

At this crisis, my senses almost failed; yet, at whatever pain to myself, I was now to inform Emma of what alone could save her; and—above all things—she must be saved.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE RECOVERY.

The physician had left me a cordial of great power, recommending me to use it, if necessary, to sustain and restore temporarily Emma's mental strength and tranquillity. Deeming the present a fit occasion, I gave her some of it in a spoon, and she swallowed it mechanically.

After a few minutes, a faint blush tinged Emma's cheek, and she opened her eyes like one just aroused from a dream. Wishing to prevent a recurrence of the thoughts that had brought on her swoon, and resolved to bring this painful scene to a conclusion, I cried, gaily, "Wake up, wake up, you sleepy child! M. de Rochegune has just arrived, and is now with Madame de Richeville!"

I had hardly pronounced the name of M. de Rochegune, when Emma's heart began to throb with a violence that greatly alarmed me. She regarded me with a look full of surprise and delight, but without the least confusion.

"Has M. de Rochegune returned?" murmured she.

"Yes, yes;" I replied, in a broken and excited tone, conscious that each word I uttered destroyed one of my long-cherished hopes—"yes, he comes with plans of great interest to you—plans which he and I have concerted: I loved him with all the fondness that you now feel, but we could not hitherto speak on the subject to you—there were obstacles—great obstacles—it is necessary, now, that you should understand his intentions: yes—we thought only of you—and you thought that I was thinking only of him—and that he thought of no one but me. This is the reason that you felt toward me those emotions of dislike, which, however, you did not yourself comprehend. It was jealousy, my child, and a jealousy the most unjust; for M. de Rochegune loves you as passionately as you love him, although he has never disclosed it to you: yes! he loves you—he loves you; you need not now fear for yourself nor for him—the obstacles that existed are all removed. He has demanded your hand in marriage, from your second mother, and she has given him her consent. Henceforth you will pass your life with him—but you must make haste to regain your health—you must get back again your rosy cheeks! Emma! ah, Emma! you wont speak of dying now!"

It would be vain to attempt a description of the thousand gradations and changes that Emma's feelings and countenance underwent while I was speaking: surprise—joy—fear—rapture—succeeded each other with inconceivable rapidity.

Nevertheless, I had foreseen that, in this decisive proceeding, my precautions, exaggerations, and concealments, would not at once effect the great change which had been principally anticipated as the effect of my heroic disclosure.

Emma was saved. But at first I could not realize it: the shock was terrible: and for a time I was in mortal agony.

An increase of delirium succeeded Emma's sudden return to reason, during which she uttered many disconnected sentences. She often repeated my name, following it with words like these—"forgive me, my tutelary angel!" But through a strange oblivion, or rather, perhaps, from instinctive delicacy, she did not once pronounce the name of M. de Rochegune. This crisis, however, terminated favourably;—not in a swoon, but in a quiet slumber.

The physician arrived at the moment when she fell asleep. It was now my turn to be crushed and overpowered by accumulated misery.

"Well, madam?" said the doctor, inquiringly, and with anxiety.

I made no reply, but endeavouring to conceal my tears with my hands, I motioned to approach the bed. He did so, and after regarding her for a few moments, he exclaimed, joyously:

"She is safe! You have explained it all to her, of course! Madam, it is a miracle; it is a positive resurrection! It is wonderful! See; she now sleeps naturally—and yet, but a few hours ago, she was in a delirious fever. How did you disclose this to her?"

I informed him, in the briefest possible terms, of what I had done, omitting only what related to myself. When I told him in what manner I had deceived Emma, as to M. de Rochegune's return, he at first looked alarmed, but afterward he reassured me on this point by saying:

"You had more courage, madam, and more discretion, than I should have had. The child was doomed, and nothing but a violent reaction could have saved her. Prudence, alone, would never have produced this result; and now, for her, hope is the only road to health. And now, to complete this good work, it is of the last importance that you should be present when she awakes. She will at first think, that she has been dreaming this story of her happiness; and it will be necessary for you to repeat it in the same manner as before: above all, you must take care that she does not suspect you of deceiving her; a relapse would in that case occur that must necessarily kill her. M. de Rochegune is not here—but he must be sent for, and in such a way, that he will come with all speed."

I now remembered the letter I had sent, enjoining him to come to me in haste, and I replied:

"He has already been sent for: he will doubtless be here the day after to-morrow."

"Sent for already, and by you?" exclaimed the doctor.

Struck by the tone of his remark, I said quietly, "No one else could have sent for him in relation to this affair."

"That is very true," said he; "well, it is fortunate, and we will take courage for the sequel."

"I am afraid my strength will fail me."

"You will recover it, madam, in reflecting that if you do not, all will yet be lost; without your farther aid, this miraculous restoration will be of no avail;—for observe: when the young lady wakes, she would ask the maids for Madame de Richeville, they could not be in the secret, and all would be prematurely discovered."

"How is the duchess?"

"I have just seen her; the sedative I previously ordered has thrown her into a quiet sleep. She was sinking under excitement and fatigue; but there is now no danger in that quarter; and you need not, hereafter, fear to inform her of what has passed between you and Emma."

"Oh, no! I would rather not! I beg you to let that rest a secret with ourselves."

"I promise it, at your request. But when Emma is quite recovered, how can you prevent her from speaking to Madame de Richeville of M. de Rochegune and of the marriage? When she is entirely well, her hopes might indeed be gradually disappointed, but until ——"

"Hold!" cried I, interrupting him. "I have but one fear—and that is, that God will not long grant me my reason. You know not, doctor, you cannot know what I have this day endured. My brain will not—doctor!—what are the symptoms of madness!—is it when the veins above the temples throb as if they would burst?—mine throb so now!"

"Madam!——"

"Is it when the power of thought seems to vacillate and flicker like the flame of an expiring lamp?—I feel thus at this moment, doctor!"

Doctor Gérard afterward told me, that for a while, on this occasion, he feared I should go mad; and, knowing what he did of the precedent circumstances, he was greatly apprehensive that I should never be able to complete my work of devotion.

"Madam!" said he, "be quiet; compose yourself; rest on my arm. Come, I will open one of the windows; the evening is magnificent, and a little fresh air will be of great service to Emma."

He accordingly opened the window that overlooked the garden. It was near the end of March; the air was mild, it was the beginning of spring, and the moon shone brilliantly, surrounded by a myriad of stars.

I eagerly inhaled the fresh air, exposed my burning forehead to the cool breeze, and by degrees I grew more tranquil. I raised my eyes to Heaven with resignation mingled with bitterness and woe. While thus regarding the immensity of the firmament, the mysterious communication between myself and heaven, seemed to be re-established; and I thought I heard again the voice which had before addressed me.

"Take courage!" it said; "take courage, noble lady! You have elevated yourself to the highest point of devotion; your suffering is holy and sublime—but you shall suffer no more. Do not, however, leave your work incomplete. Trust in God—He will inspire you—He will give you strength to overcome all the obstacles which now seem insurmountable: He never deserts the faithful in heart. With those whom he loves, they who suffer the most are the most beloved. His spirit guides them—His countenance cheers them—his strength sustains them."

These thoughts inspired me anew; they were to my crushed spirit, what the cool breeze was to my burning forehead.

"You feel yourself better, madam, do you not?" inquired the doctor, after a long silence.

His voice seemed to be agitated. The moon shone full on his grave features, and two large tears coursed down his cheeks.

"What is the matter, doctor?" said I.

He looked at me steadily for a moment, and then said, in a tremulous tone.

"You have enjoined me to secrecy, madam, and you have my promise; but there are no secrets there!" and he raised his finger toward heaven.

Could Doctor Gérard have learned, from public rumour, my attachment to M. de Rochegune? Has he learned it since this morning? I asked myself these questions, but I could find no answer. He was a man who mingled but little with the world, and who gave little heed to its reports and its scandals. It was, therefore, very possible that he, in fact, knew nothing of the causes which rendered this sacrifice so dreadful to me.

After a few directions, as to the treatment of Emma, he took his departure, and I remained alone with her, watching her slumber.

After three hours of profound sleep, Emma awoke. If, to have saved this poor child from death, was a sufficient consolation to me for what I had suffered, I ought now to have been satisfied; for, during this brief slumber, a change had taken place, so extraordinary, that she could scarcely be recognized. Hope had restored her life. She knew, or at least she believed, that she was beloved as passionately as she loved. But here a new thought presented itself: I trembled to think of the fatal consequences which might ensue from the deception I had felt it necessary to practise: but I shut my eyes to the result, and put my trust in heaven. As soon as Emma awoke, she seemed to strive to collect her thoughts, and said,

"Is it true? My God! is it true? It was you——"

"Yes, yes! it was I who told you; and what I said is true. You love M. de Rochegune, and he loves you. We will speak of your happiness presently. How do you feel now?"

"I am weak; but I now wish to live, as a little while ago I wished to die."

"You are happy, then?"

"Oh yes! I see now that it was M. de Rochegune who gave me the happiness that I could not understand. I feel, that hereafter I shall have no more of those moods in which I loved you less—" She here interrupted herself, and buried her face in her hands for a moment, and then continued —"It is strange how clear a light your disclosure has shed on the past! I remarked that when he joined us, my pleasure greatly increased, and yet I did not attribute the effect to him. All that he said, I remembered—the songs that he sang, I learned immediately. It seemed to me, that I had within me an echo to his spirit. When I heard him praised, it gave me as much happiness as if I had been praised. When I accompanied him on the piano, I was conscious of playing better than usual. When he conversed with me, instead of being intimidated, my thoughts and words flowed more freely than ever."

"And why did you never tell this to Madame de Richeville or myself?"

"True! true! why did I not?" said she, as if trying to find a reason. "I believe it was, because these things were precisely so from the first day I saw M. de Rochegune. I did not suppose it could be otherwise; it seemed so natural that I did not speak of it. To be happy with him—was like living, breathing, seeing, thinking—in short, I was like one who should enjoy the blessings of God, without knowing that there is a God. Formerly, when my joy was disturbed by a fear or a recollection, I could not disguise my sadness. I understand, now, why I shed involuntary tears when I saw the snow fall; it was because M. de Rochegune was once nearly perishing in the snow."

"Before I arrived," said I, "he sometimes spoke of me to Madame de Richeville, did he not?"

"Oh, constantly! he always spoke of you as the most accomplished of ladies, and one whom he loved best. That is the reason I loved you so much before I saw you. And since I have had the happiness to know you, M. de Rochegune has waited with such impatience for your return but—"

"Say on; tell me all, my child;—you may now."

"When I saw you so often near him, I began to grow thoughtful and sad;—oh! I wished to die!" then, checking herself, she added, "but what avails it to recall these past troubles? that prolonged unconsciousness, of which I ought to be ashamed? I beg you, leave me to forget that, and be as kind and generous to me as ever."

"Yes, yes! let us forget—let us forget the past! it is my greatest desire!"

"But lady! dear lady! I owe my life to you!"

"Then, in turn, you can do much, very much for me."

"Tell me how."

"By giving me your entire—your unreserved confidence; in listening to my advice, following my counsels, and, above all, in believing that I wish your happiness."

"I know this; I faithfully believe it; and I as faithfully promise to do what you request."

"Listen then. Your marriage with M. de Rochegune will take place very soon—perhaps even sooner than you could have hoped. Those obstacles to which I referred, and which were once of some consequence, will easily be removed: but—you have suffered so much—you are still so feeble—that you must not think of seeing *him* for several days: to see him now might cause you some dangerous excitement."

"On, no! no! no! it would entirely cure me!"

"But, my dear child—think of the effect upon him—if he should find you so changed: you must bear in mind, that it is only since his departure that your disease has made such terrible progress."

"That is too true! When he went away, it was like a fatal blow to me: it was as if everything about me was dark and hopeless. I closed my eyes, and prayed heaven to keep me in his remembrance: and, in my distress, God sent a good angel to watch me." And she kissed my hand tenderly as she spoke thus:

"Trust yourself, then, to my guidance," I answered; "and, above all, do not cause M. de Rochegune any unhappiness."

"I! Good heavens!"

"When he perceives in your face, the traces of your suffering, he will reproach himself with having caused it by his silence. I therefore do not wish you to see him until you have entirely recovered, and are as gay and pretty as before. There is another very important thing, which you must bear in mind: Madame de Richeville, greatly desires your union with M. de Rochegune; yet, not knowing precisely your sentiments toward him, and considering that you are so young, she has determined not to inform you of her projects, but has confided them to me, with a special charge, to keep them concealed from you. Nevertheless, in order to make you happy, and at the same time to communicate that which I was sure would benefit your health, I have committed the great fault of breaking my promise. Now, my dear child, you at least, must give me no occasion to repent my indiscretion; and you must, therefore, never reveal to the duchess what I have told you. She will carry out her intentions with regard to you, but you must not appear to understand any more than she herself communicates: I do not ask you to say anything that is untrue, but only to say nothing. In this way, Madame de Richeville cannot reproach me with having betrayed her secret, nor, above all, with having deprived her of the pleasure of first announcing to you a marriage so consonant to her wishes and your own."

"I will do what you desire, "replied Emma, "although it will be the first time that I ever knowingly practised dissimulation: my wish to obey you compels me to be so far imprudent."

"But this is not all," said I, trying to smile; "I must require of you still farther dissimulation.'

"What must it be?"

"M. de Rochegune loves you—loves you tenderly—but he dares not declare it to you before ascertaining from Madame de Richeville, whether she or you have any objections to a marriage that he so ardently desires. It will, therefore, be necessary, when you are in company with M. de Rochegune, to appear quite ignorant of his intentions—and—afterward—when you are married—you must never reveal to him what I have this day communicated to you. You can easily see how mortifying it would be to me, should he be aware that I had made his declaration of love to you—for him, and in anticipation of him—and without his authority."

"Oh, yes!" she replied, with entire simplicity, "I appreciate your motives—and then you and I shall have a secret of our own, shall we not?"

"And yet," said I, "you must not change your manner toward M. de Rochegune."

"But now that I know I love him, and that he loves me, how can I disguise it?"

"You must not appear to disguise anything from him. Do as you have done: act naturally and without restraint, and in that way you will most surely continue to please him. If any circumstances should occur which I cannot foresee—which should cause me to be absent occasionally—and in the meantime you should desire my advice while Madame de Richeville is unfolding her projects to you—you can write to me by my maid, Blondeau, whom I will send to you from time to time, and I will answer you by the same means."

"Without acquainting Madame de Richeville?" said Emma, with surprise, as if this secrecy were repugnant to her honest and ingenuous spirit.

"You forget, my child, that Madame de Richeville knows nothing, and must know nothing, of what I have already said, and what we propose to do; and you surely know me well enough, to believe that I would ask of you nothing wrong."

"Oh, yes! But are you going away? I wish to talk with you every moment of that which is now my life. Are you really going—and for a long time?"

"No—I think not——"

"Oh! no: you will not—you cannot leave your poor Emma, who owes you so much? But, tell me: how can a few words have thus changed the aspect and the reality of the past?"

"Do not seek for the cause of your happiness, my child; but thank God, who has vouchsafed it."

Soon after this, Emma again sank to sleep; and I, overcome with fatigue and excitement, fell also into a slumber.

The next day, about noon, I was awakened by Blondeau, who gave me a note from M. de Rochegune, saying:

"The marquis was not at Rochegune, but at his estate, near Fontainebleau. The letter was taken to him thither, and he has just arrived here."

I opened the note with a trembling hand, and read these words:

'*Our destiny is accomplished! There are joys so sudden and so profound, that we can respond to them with nothing but prayer. When I received your letter, I fell on my knees and wept. When shall I see you?*'

I answered, in haste:

"*I will receive you at one.*"

And, at one o'clock, M. de Rochegune entered my saloon.

CHAPTER XX.

THE RETURN.

On entering my apartment, the first movement of M. de Rochegune was, to throw himself at my feet; he then took my hands, and covered them with tears of happiness; he, generally so much master of himself, appeared to be absolutely mad with joy. Never had I seen his features, as I may say, lighted up with that internal radiance which is communicated by intense and unexpected happiness.

My eyes were dry and burning. I had exhausted all my tears. I felt astounded. I could not determine what answer I should give to M. de Rochegune, when he should ask me to account for the sudden overthrow of all his happiness.

His first emotion having subsided, he looked at me steadfastly; and it was only then that he perceived the ravages which grief had left upon my features. After having for a moment examined them with an expression of touching interest, he sorrowfully said to me, "I see it; this resolution has cost you dearly. I can conceive it. I am proud of having triumphed in this struggle. Oh! by how much tenderness will I cause you to forget these tears—the last that you shall ever shed, Matilda!"

"I wished to——"

"Oh! no!" said he interrupting me with the volubility of happiness, "do not say a word—do not speak to me. Allow me to contemplate you; to admire you with the jealousy—with the savage covetousness of the miser, for the treasure which he at last possesses. Let me take large draughts of this intoxicating idea—that this woman, who is before me—this woman, is my own; she, the ideal wife of my dreams of infancy and youth! Allow me to say to myself: she whom men, whom circumstances, whom her own will appeared to separate for ever from me—she is there—she belongs to me. Oh! I did not believe it! Yonder? No, I will believe it only now, that you may not lose any of the raptures you have caused; and yet sometimes I have felt that the irresistible power of our love destined us to happiness—that it was merely a question of time. At one time I feared your scruples; another, on the contrary, I yielded to the most delightful anticipations; and, oh! these days, which I have passed at such a distance from you—in such suspense—with such mortal dread before me—they have been terrible! You cannot imagine the horrible, the senseless ideas which have crossed my mind, when I reflected that, in a few short days, I might be compelled to say to you, 'Adieu, Matilda! and adieu for ever!' Oh! I wish you to remain ignorant of what I have suffered. You would reproach yourself too bitterly for having rendered me unhappy."

"Believe me, I shall always feel remorse when thinking of the grief I have occasioned you," I replied, mechanically.

"But now I am not generous, Matilda. I do not tell you that, although in my solitude I had frightful days of doubt, I also had some rays of enchanting hope. It was during one of these moments that I delighted myself —and with the delight of a child—in drawing a sketch of a delicious retreat which I dreamed of for us at Castellamare. Since you love Italy so much, around us shall be flowers—above our heads, those venerable trees—, at our feet, the sea—Vesuvius on the horizon? What say you of this framework for our love?"

"My friend, I——"

"Pardon, pardon, Matilda! It is true that I talk wildly. Have we not a thousand considerations more serious than these?—a thousand resolutions to form? What shall we say to our friends? Shall I set out before or after you? Who will you take as chaperon for this journey? Oh, heaven! my poor head, generally so clear, now turns with the prospect of so much felicity. It is not my fault, if I am now so giddy; it is a whirlwind of happiness which throws me at your feet. But, heavens! what a mournful—troubled look, Matilda! That you should not feel so boisterously happy as I do, is well; but, at least, allow me to perceive a smile upon your lips—a glance of affection in your eyes.—In truth, Matilda, the more I look at you —— but I have never seen you wear a look so gloomy—almost ominous! What have you to impart to me?"

"Oh! some very gloomy—very inauspicious events!"

"I do not understand you. What can have happened? Your letter—did it not say to me, 'Come, come?'"

"Enough! pray do not—for pity's sake! do not remind me of that letter!"

"Not remind you of that letter! and why not?"

"Since I dispatched that letter to you," I replied, casting down my eyes to avoid his looks, "I have seen M. de Lancry."

"Your husband! Where did this happen?"

"In my own house here."

"Here! Did he dare to come hither? and for what? Doubtless for some new iniquity—but what care we for your husband. You are for ever and ever separated from him! What influence can he now exercise upon our actions? You have for him the hatred and contempt, which he so well has merited. What signifies his coming here? It is only a new proof of his baseness—that is all!"

I felt my heart die within me. The moment had arrived for striking a decisive blow, to destroy at once not only de Rochegune's present hopes, but all his future too: with one word to annihilate the love he bore me. Without this, my sacrifice would be useless. In order that he should marry Emma, it was necessary he should no longer love me—that he should not retain the slightest hope of being beloved by me.

Oh, my God! I implored thee to sustain me; and, thanks to thee, I had the courage.

"But, once more, Matilda," rejoined M. de Rochegune, "what can your husband's visits signify? Perhaps you have allowed yourself to be intimidated by his threats.

"His threats!—It would have pleased me better, had he threatened me."

"How! what can you mean?"

"He, on the contrary, came to me trembling, and unhappy—with words full of tenderness and repentance."

"And could you believe in his hypocritical protestations? Have you, then, felt any scruples awakened within you? Can you have been the dupe of this miserable comedy?"

"I can assure you that M. de Lancry spoke sincerely; with all the delicacy, all the respect imaginable, he avowed his past faults; his avowal was made with such generous frankness, that, without excusing him, one might, perhaps, pardon them."

M. de Rochegune looked at me with astonishment. The measured benevolence with which I spoke of my husband, confounded him. Then, shaking his head, he said to me, in a touching and mournful voice—"Come, come, I comprehend; your generous soul believes in this repentance, impossible as it may be, that you may no longer have reasons for hatred. Well, I can feel as you do, that now we ought no longer either to hate or to despise; let us forget: forgetfulness is the disdain, the revenge, of happy hearts."

"It was not only to express his deep regret at having so mistaken me, that my husband came to me; he told me—he pretended—that as we were not separated by any—legal act—I ought to——"

M. de Rochegune hastily interrupted me. Alas! to complete the measure of my regret, the idea which I had entertained, struck him also; and he exclaimed—"Well, so much the better! After all, he is right; your position and my own will thus be better defined; the separation from bed and board, is almost equivalent to a divorce; you will be thus for ever rid of your husband." Then he paused a moment, and said, "Now I comprehend your melancholy; you rightly fear the scandal of a law-suit—not for yourself; for you can but be a gainer, by having your conduct made evident to all the world; but you think that the shameful conduct of the man whose name you bear, will be disgracefully exposed, in these sorrowful proceedings. That is true; but in the end, justice must have its sway. You have sacrificed yourself long enough; reflect that this formality, once complied with, your future liberty is legally assured. The last doubt which you might still have entertained as to your *moral right*, will thus be dissipated."

My torments became intolerable: I collected all my strength, and said to M. de Rochegune, in a distinct, but agitated tone, "It is impossible for me to allow you to continue in this error. I wrote to you a letter; in that letter I requested you to return to me; that I accepted the future which you offered me. That letter had scarcely left the house, when M. de Lancry presented himself before me."

"Well!"

"Then I confess to you—touched by his remorse—his tenderness—his misfortunes—his protestations—moved by the recollection of former days—in spite of myself, I—I—promised him that I would never leave him more."

I had ejaculated these words as though they burned my lips, without daring to look at M. de Rochegune, and with indescribable trepidation. After some seconds, alarmed at his not speaking, I raised my head, He appeared as if listening to my words, not with wonder or despair, but with an agitated curiosity. When I had done speaking, he said, very coldly, "I have perfectly understood all you have said to me. I know that you are incapable of inventing so fearful a mockery, at such a serious moment;—your voice is trembling, your features are convulsed, your emotion is alarming;

—and yet, my dear Matilda, you must perceive from the expression of my countenance, that I do not believe one word that you have uttered."

"You do not believe?"

"It is impossible for me to believe it, because it cannot be—because it is not so."

"I feel, that a soul like yours, must consider such a weakness as impossible; but——"

"I do not analyze—I draw no comparisons. I tell you plainly that this cannot be—that this is not so. All that renders me uneasy, is your agitation—your paleness. As to the cause which has induced you to hold this language, I cannot now divine it, but I shall do so hereafter."

"Ought I not to feel emotion—to be trembling, and in despair—when, a victim to a sentiment which I cannot surmount, I thus return your love?"

M. de Rochegune shrugged his shoulders, and said to me, with a calmness which quite disconcerted me, "You must necessarily have very powerful motives, Matilda, to make such an avowal to me. Happily, my faith in you is proof against all this. I have sufficiently studied my own heart, to know that of others, and, above all, yours. It is sufficient for me to remember what you said to me a thousand times, before my late departure: these were not mere words; they were truths, which you then felt and uttered."

"But——

"But, my dear Matilda, in the short space of four-and-twenty hours, a woman, such as you, does not degrade herself. The proof that I believe you incapable of such conduct, is, that I am, at this moment, in the same state of mind, in which I came to you. I do not believe one word of this fable of your husband's visit. You despise him—you hate him, full as much, and even more, than you have ever hated him—this is the truth."

"You believe me capable of uttering a falsehood?"

"Yes, certainly—for a great and glorious purpose; and I am certain, that under this, there is hidden some mysterious sacrifice; yes—some noble, some exalted purpose, without doubt;—for, to adventure what you now are risking, there must be some surpassing compensation! But, fortunately, you are not alone in this world, Matilda; the care of your happiness belongs to me; it is my province to watch over my treasure. I will defend you, even, against yourself. My clear-sightedness is generally admitted. Before four-and-twenty hours, your secret will be discovered."

I was at the same time delighted, even to tears, and alarmed to find that my secret was suspected. It was absolutely necessary, however, and at any price, to detach M. de Rochegune from me; to deprive him of every hope; and, above all, to prevent him from thinking that I was sacrificing myself for any other person.

If I had only attributed my return to M. de Lancry, to the observances of society, or to compassion,—M. de Rochegune would have always believed himself beloved by me, and this would have rendered my design, as to his marrying Emma, still more impossible. It was necessary, then, that I should have the courage to feign a passionate love for M. de Lancry, in order to remove from M. de Rochegune's mind every species of illusion regarding me.

My position was at once cruel and difficult, because Emma was in question, that unhappy child, to whom I owed the fulfilment of the promises which I had given her.

My conduct was, therefore, marked out with the plainest, though the most frightful precision. To annihilate the love which M. de Rochegune had felt for me—and, his heart, once free, to lead him on to suspect and perceive Emma's love for him:—this was the only way I could render my sacrifice great and advantageous. Emma would be happy; M. de Rochegune would be happy also;—for he could not fail duly to appreciate her angelic character—and I, at least, should enjoy a melancholy consolation.

If, on the other hand, I should not succeed, my sterile sacrifice would cause the misery of two persons, whom I loved better than all the world. Alas! these reflections sufficiently proved, that my only chance of success, was to feign for M. de Lancry a passion as odious as it was inexplicable. I therefore said to M. de Rochegune:

"Your incredulity does not astonish me; my conduct must appear so highly culpable in your eyes, that you can hardly deem it possible. Pardon me, if I once more revert to the past. When last you left me, you were full of sorrow, agitated; and again, when in your solitude you passed alternately from confidence to despair: you admitted, however, the possibility of a separation—which you had even yourself proposed to me."

"Without doubt; and, notwithstanding your letter, which so urgently requested my return, had I found you still irresolute—even changed as to the resolution you had taken, I might have understood it. I should have calculated that time, and my influence over you, would lead you back to the fulfilment of your promise. But that I should be mad enough to believe that you, Matilda—that you, during my absence, should once more, and so suddenly, have become enamored of M. de Lancry—I could rather believe you capable of having twenty lovers, than of committing such a baseness!"

"And why then, should it be termed a baseness? Is he not my husband? If he regrets the vexations he has caused me, is it not generous, on my part, to pardon him! and finally, you have seen that notwithstanding my inclination, my affection for you, I have always remained obstinately faithful to my duties. This was because I loved you only as a brother, because you merely inspired me with a lively friendship—my first love was smouldering, not extinguished, and in this consisted all my virtue."

M. de Rochegune was highly superior to most men, both as to disposition and the admirable qualities he possessed; but notwithstanding, he, like the vulgar herd of men, put more credence in the last argument I had advanced; or rather he felt it more keenly than the other, because it deeply wounded his self-love.

"I should as soon have thought of doubting my own father!" exclaimed he, shrinking with ungovernable horror. "Can it be you? you! who are thus speaking? But we have seen:—yes, there have been instances of such irresistible fascination, of such overpowering and fatal passions, that angels of goodness, and purity, have been for ever chained by them to men utterly depraved and infamous! But, no! no!" he continued, with a burst of noble indignation: "no! there is no such thing as fascination, no fatality—these are words invented by weakness, cowardice, or shame. I tell you that I do not believe you! you no longer love: you can no longer love this man, unless you are as perverse—as lost as he!"

He spoke the truth. I understood, I admired his noble anger; but to keep up the semblance of the painful part which I was acting, I was constrained to defend my feigned love for M. de Lancry, and M. de Lancry himself.

Oh! how gratefully did I thank heaven, that it had given me the strength to conceal from M. de Rochegune, the ardent and passionate love which I had so long entertained, and which I still felt for him! Could he have guessed it—had I acknowledged this to him—how could I, without sinking with confusion, have told him, that the presence of M. de Lancry had awakened within me a new passion for him? Oh! no, no! M. de Rochegune would not have credited such a baseness, and I could never have endeavoured to persuade him of it.

He walked agitatedly up and down the room;—he suffered visibly. I hastened to abridge this painful scene.

"You are unjust," said I to him, "to accuse me of perversity, because an affection, fatally bestowed, if you will, but after all legitimate, has been revived within me. Did I not remain for years together under the spell which my husband cast around me. Have I not sacrificed all that I possessed to this man, whose presence—yes, I must avow it—whose presence exercises an irresistible dominion over me? Up to the very moment of my again beholding him, I had been firm, courageous even; but as soon as I beheld him repentant at my feet, and his eyes met mine—oh! then, dignity, courage, grief,—all was forgotten, and I ran, with joy, to clasp my chains again."

"This is horrible! there is a want of all modesty in acknowledging such a disgraceful influence. You must be mad! I do not believe you—I will not believe you."

"And yet, if any one ought to believe me, it is you, for I speak to you without the least concealment; I do not attempt to colour this renewed affection by any false appearances. I might say to you, as I shall say to our friends; that pity for the misfortunes, the remorse of my husband—that even an exaggeration of my duties may cause me to act thus; but as to you, I tell you that which is; to you I speak the truth, however shameful it may be. Well, then I tell you, that I love him! yes, with a love I dare not define. Be that as it may be—but I love him—'tis fatal—'tis involuntary—but so it is."

"Still this is infamous, madam; still I love you, and you have told me that you love me."

"And who now says I do not love you? Was it you or I who wished to profane the purity of the ties which unite us? Was it not you? And because, in a moment of weakness, of compassion, I imprudently wrote to you the word *come*, was this an irrevocable promise? Did you not yourself tell me, that if on your return from your travels you had not found me separated from my husband, you should loyally have declared to me your attachment for me? This is our present position, nothing has changed. My affection for you is still as devoted, as pure, as fraternal as before. And, after all, who has the right to condemn me? Our friends themselves, austere as they may be, cannot but applaud me for having forgotten the wrongs my husband has inflicted on me, and having returned to him, when I found him unhappy and forsaken."

"Well! at least persist in saying that—there is still time to do so—and you will not drive me for ever from you. Say that humanity dictates your conduct; and I shall understand that humanity is so constituted, that an extravagant ambition will sometimes take advantage of even the most admirable self-devotion. I will believe that noble souls can by some fatal error, sacrifice all to their desire for admiration—to their rage for heroism. Say, that it is from a feeling of austere pity you return to your husband; I will believe you—you would always be to me the woman, of all women, her to whom I have devoted my whole life. What would you more? You possess the exaggeration of virtue—as so many others do the exaggeration of vice. But, out of pity to yourself and me, do not tell me that irresistible affection throws you into the arms of this man—do not continue to distress me with the words 'he is my husband;' he is no longer so! His ignoble conduct has placed a barrier between you which is insurmountable. You may feel pity for him—clemency, kindness; and, in short, every sentiment excepting love."

"And that is, nevertheless, the only, or, rather, the most powerful sentiment which draws me back to him!" exclaimed I, in order to close at once this cruel scene. "Yes; though you may despise me for it, in him I love the man, who first taught my heart to palpitate with emotion;—in him, I love my husband—in him, I love my lover. Yes, my lover; and 't is for that I will return to him!"

M. de Rochegune hid his face in his hands, and remained silent for a long time. He then said in a low voice, as though listening to his own thoughts, "This is most strange; I have always said so, but I could never have believed it—it was necessary to see all that I have seen."

"What is the matter?" cried I, alarmed at his wild looks; "what is the matter?"

"A singular phenomena is passing within me, Matilda," said he, and then continued, speaking to himself: "Yes, yes; my hopes—my convictions, give way slowly, one by one. They fall like the dead leaves from the tree—without being torn from it. At each wound I receive, instead of experiencing sharp pain, a cold numbness comes over me—instead of being excited by violent paroxysms of anger or despair, I feel a bitter disdain, combined with affecting compassion. All my past life, which I had deemed not subjected to change, flies from me, lessens and disappears. Well! I have taken for imperishable marble, snow which melts with the sun's first rays. Again, I say, this is most wonderful! It was but now, when thinking I might be obliged to renounce for ever this truly adored woman, the bare supposition appeared to me a deep abyss, which I could not contemplate without giddiness. And now how changed it is! Instead of that grand though terrifying abyss, I see before me but a slough, from which I hasten to withdraw my eyes. And yet it is I—it is truly I, myself: I to whom this love has been the pole, the fixed, the one idea;—I, who for ten years have not passed a day, an hour, without bestowing a thought upon this love!—I, whom this love sustained, and carried forward, to attempt and accomplish such great good deeds:—I, who only yesterday wept like a child:—I, who but now experienced one of those intense, unutterable feelings of joy, almost divine, because I thought I had attained the almost unhoped for goal of my desire. And now! what is there left for me? Nothing—absolutely nothing!—a mere void! In vain I seek the site of that gigantic and sublime edifice, which, till then, I had raised up in my soul with such holy ardour. What remains of it? thought by thought, recollection by recollection—all has faded; a breath has sufficed to cause its disappearance, and it has disappeared without leaving even a river, a tree, a fragment. Tell me, Matilda—tell me! is not this most strange?"

Oh! nothing could be more terrible, than to hear him thus analyze the overthrow of all his hopes, and his belief in me! I was once again on the point of telling him, how much I had deceived him, how much I loved him! Must I avow this baseness; it was the disdainful resignation of myself by M. de Rochegune, that caused this passing weakness. And yet, this disdain on his part, was forwarding my designs. His despair might have renewed my strength, by proving that I was still beloved—and it was necessary that he should no longer love me.

Addressing himself to me, he continued: "It would be incomprehensible, in any other person but myself:—but my disposition is such, that the most subtle, the most rapid poison, is not more mortal than my contempt, when it once attacks my affections, be they as strong and long-lived as they may." Then, rising abruptly, he said, "after all, humanity is but humanity, gold and clay knocked together. I ought to take pity on your aberration, by thinking of the qualities which compensate for it. I ought not to scatter to the winds ten years of holy and inspired affections—ten years of idolatry, of worship! But I cannot—I know myself, and I am absolute in all—I cannot regard you but as a divinity, or as one of the common herd of women. While you were elevated on your pedestal, I adored you; but now, that you have descended from it disgracefully—now you are to me like all other women, and I abjure my former adoration."

"Thus," said I to him, with bitterness, "had I listened to you, when you entreated me to forget my duties, contempt, no doubt, would have repaid my sacrifice. Perhaps, at this very moment, you would already have abjured your former adoration, for I should then, also, have disgracefully descended from my pedestal. I yield to a legitimate inclination, and you despise me for it. But had I yielded to a guilty one?"

This reflection appeared to touch him—he remained thoughtful. He then exclaimed, with ill-suppressed violence, "I told you, long since, that should I ever doubt you, I should doubt myself. Well! that hour has now arrived. I doubt both myself and you! Yes—woe to you! who have overthrown all my ideas of good and evil. Woe be to you! who can inspire aversion, by accomplishing a sacred duty. Woe be to you! who can become perverted, while obeying a lawful love! Yes! I less despise the hypocrisy of vice, than your immodest virtue!" and saying this, he rushed out of the room.

All was now ended—he despised me, he hated me! From this moment, my sacrifice was fully accomplished.

I felt that his heart was lost to me. He had cruelly obliged me to be present, and to witness the last throbs of his expiring love and esteem for me; I had no longer any doubt his heart was void. Who was to occupy it?

At this moment a diabolical idea presented itself to my imagination. "And Ursula," exclaimed I, "were she now to assay her seductions upon him? Now, that he is free, soured; now that he believes in the existence of evil, since he doubts me! Is he not precisely in that frame of mind, in which he would be most accessible to the fatal influence of that woman?"

And Emma, that child to whom I have promised his love—Emma, who, without that love, will die; could she even contend with Ursula? above all, should Ursula love passionately! And I—I should reluctantly, yet voluntarily have renounced my love—to see this hateful woman occupy the heart of M. de Rochegune!

Events followed each other so closely, that I own I had not for an instant thought of the interview which had taken place, between Ursula and M. de Rochegune, at the ball at the opera house.

Had this idea struck me before, I should, perhaps, have had the cruelty to sacrifice Emma, rather than to risk seeing Ursula beloved by M. de Rochegune.

CHAPTER XXI

LEAVE TAKING.

Having come to a determination, I wrote to M. de Lancry, that after having maturely reflected upon the wish he had expressed to me, I willingly consented to return to live with him. I feared that he might employ some legal violence, and thus compromise all my projects, by raising doubts as to my anxiety to rejoin him.

After the departure of M. de Rochegune, I went to see Madame de Richeville and Emma. The latter wss much better. The doctor considered her recovery as certain. The duchess, who was quite well, thanked me, with much feeling, for the attention I had paid to her daughter.

When I abruptly announced to Madame de Richeville my desire tc return to M. de Lancry—a desire which I attributed to the pity which his misfortunes and his repentance had inspired—the duchess thought me crazy; and did all she could, by her arguments, her entreaties, and even her reproaches, to dissuade me from it;—but nothing could shake my purpose. The Prince d'Hericourt, and his wife, joined my friend, to demonstrate to me the absurdity of my conduct. I asked them whether I should forfeit their esteem? They told me that I should not; that it was a praiseworthy exaggeration of duty without doubt; but that it would be a fatal example, and that it would be deplorable to witness such an instance of self-devotion, lavished upon vice and corruption.

It was in vain that I pretended the unhappiness, and the repentance of my husband; they replied, that his unhappiness was well deserved, that his repentance was in no way proved. Many years of irreproachable conduct would hardly have sufficed to merit the proof of blind attachment which I was about to give him.

I felt more forcibly, than either of them, the truth of their remonstrances; but there were too many interests at stake to allow me to hesitate an instant in the course I had traced out.

I nevertheless perceived, with much regret, that the prince and his wife felt less friendly toward me. I suffered much in their judgment: they thought me feeble, and wanting in proper dignity. They really felt sorry, and with reason, that I should renounce their protecting intimacy, which had been so great a consolation to me, for the purpose of living with a man whom they despised, and hated for all the injuries he had done me; and from whom they had, as I may say, morally separated me. In short, they regretted having felt so much interest for sorrows which I myself appeared so soon to have forgotten. I told these friends—at the same time so just and so severe—that pity only reconciled me to M. de Lancry. Alas! it was only in the eyes of the man whom I most loved and respected in the world, that I had been obliged to feign a degrading love for my husband.

In vain the duchess requested me to remain with her, and continue to occupy my pavillion, even should she be obliged to overcome the aversion she naturally felt to being in M. de Lancry's neighbourhood; I refused: my manner of living with my husband would be too closely watched, and my deception would have been soon discovered.

I cannot describe to you the sorrow, the despair of Madame de Richeville. In the frankness of her friendship, in the violence of her grief, she reproached me very cruelly. I received her accusations without reply, for they proved the extent of her affection for me, and in her eyes I deserved her reproaches.

For the first time in my life, I experienced that bitter consolation which one feels when her actions are misunderstood, and censured, and can say to herself—with one word, I could change all this blame to admiration. It appeared to me meritoriously great, to accomplish thus alone, accused by all around me, an action which all would have admired.

Alone, and in the difficult position in which I was placed, I had to induce M. de Rochegune to marry Emma, in spite of the intrigues and seductions which Ursula would naturally bring into play, if she loved M. de Rochegune.

I will not conceal the fact, that my ardent desire for the ultimate success of this undertaking, the exalted feeling caused by a generous conviction, strengthened my nerves, excited all my energy, and prevented me from being crushed by the sacrifice I had made.

Oh! it was at this moment that I felt more forcibly than ever, the enormous difference which existed between my love for M. de Rochegune, and that I had formely felt for M. de Lancry.

Heretofore I had been oppressed, overwhelmed; I had known only how to suffer, without having the energy to act. Now, on the contrary, I suffered fully as much, but I determined that my sufferings should not be fruitless; this time my tears should be productive—even in my sorrows I wished to prove worthy of the man whom I adored.

Oh! how proud was I of this love, of this pearl of my heart preserved without a stain! If my resolution sometimes vacillated, I recalled to mind the words with which God here inspired me, while sitting by Emma's bed: DID HE BUT KNOW. "Yes," said I, mentally, "were I to-morrow to reveal all this to M. de Rochegune, would he not be at my feet?—would not his love return with greater force than ever?"

But as I cherished his remembrance more than ever, I had some moments of great anguish—of dreadful despair.

I then recalled to mind, that which the divine voice had said to me during that fatal night: *courage, unhappy woman! thou knowest not what it is to have acquired, by force of sacrifices,* THE RIGHT OF WEEPING OVER THYSELF. And, in fact, those tears afforded me a melancholy enjoyment.

I reflected also, that if I should succeed in my projects, and Emma's happiness should be once insured, M. de Rochegune would not remain insensible to her love — so lively, so ingenuous — and would appreciate it by participating in it. What would then prevent my being legally separated from my husband; and, returning to live with Madame de Richeville, relating all that had occurred to M. de Rochegune, then the husband of Emma? Sure of him and of myself, I could, without fear, reveal this mystery to him; and prove that I had never ceased to be worthy of him, and that he owed to me the happiness which he enjoyed with Emma. What a sweet recompense would this be to me, for all the sorrows I had silently endured! How peaceful and how happy would be my life then, passed in the society of those I love so dearly!

I expected M. de Lancry on the following Sunday.

Before my departure, I went to see Emma once more: she was alone. During our short conversation, I renewed to her all the recommendations which I had given to her, with regard to the secrecy she was to observe toward M. de Rochegune and Madame de Richeville. I promised to write to her by Blondeau, and recommended her to answer me by the same channel.

When she was informed of my intended return to live with my husband, the poor child, in spite of her sincere attachment to me, could not restrain an involuntarily emotion of joy. I did not accuse her heart of this, but the instinct of her love.

I promised her, that I would often go to see her, being determined to keep this promise, so necessarily to my designs.

On Sunday morning, M. de Lancry came for me, as he had announced he should.

I had omitted to say, that since Ursula had abandoned him, my husband, no doubt absorbed by his poignant feelings, had carried the neglect of his clothes and of his person to an almost beggarly carelessness. His features were wasted by grief, by watching, and latterly, by excesses of all kinds, which he had endeavoured to deaden his mad and unquestionable passi —his eyes were red, his face bloated, his beard unshaved, his hair not dres his voice rough and harsh; everything about him seemed the personifi of vice, and almost of misery. I soon afterward ascertained that this m was real.

And this was the man whom, a few years before, I had seen surrounded by all the brilliancy of elegance and success!

He said to me, as he entered the room, "I congratulate you, madam, on your obedience, although it appears to me that this sudden submission, on your part, hides some afterthought. But it matters not; do not think you can play with me—I shall prove to you, that what I will—I will."

"When shall we depart, sir?"

"Instantly, madam, instantly. But have you not a tender leave to take of your intimate friend?" said he, with irony: "have you not a few tears to exchange? Do not let me incommode you. I have five minutes at your service for these very tender salutations."

"I have taken leave of Madame de Richeville, this morning, sir; moreover, I hope soon to see her again."

"As to that, you may see whom you please—you will have full liberty—unless, indeed, hereafter I should change my mind."

"When you wish, sir, I will follow."

"One moment: I must warn you, my dear, that the apartment I inhabit is not a brilliant one; it is merely a lodging I have taken since I discharged my household, for reasons which you will guess without much trouble. I have not had time to think of its interior details; and I tell you, beforehand, that you will not be so well lodged there, as you are here."

"I shall be satisfied, sir, with that which satisfies you, provided I have but a room for myself, and one contiguous to it for Blondeau--I can send here for any furniture I may require."

"And I shall sell the rest; for I must acknowledge to you, madam, that I am singularly hampered. This surprises you—it is true, notwithstanding. You now know the sufferings of my heart; I have, therefore, nothing to conceal from you. Well! latterly, to shake off thought, I have played—played deeply—and I have lost considerably—you, have, no doubt, saved up some money?"

It appears to me, sir, that we might talk of these affairs at another moment.

"You are perfectly right, madam; will you accept my arm?"

I got into a hackney-coach with M. de Lancry. Blondeau followed me in another with some luggage. I ordered my footman to come in the evening, to bring me divers articles I wanted.

When we had got into the carriage, M. de Lancry said to me, "I have retained one servant. It may be an extravagance, but the lad is attached to me; he will suffice for us—with your Madame Blondeau. As I shall never dine at home, you can send for your meals to a neighbouring eating-house; the porteress of the house will assist Blondeau in taking care of the apartments."

"It is now about six years ago, sir, that we retured from Chantilly. You then stated to me, as you do now, the household we were about to have. The times are changed since then."

"Much changed, madam; and this proves the truth of the maxim, that days follow each other, but do not resemble. But, really, you appear to me to be in an epigrammatic vein—the blood of the Marans shows itself: but as you please; I am a good fellow—not always however. But here we are."

We stopped before an old house in the rue de Bourgone. We went across a court-yard, which was damp and gloomy. When we had ascended to the second story, a door was opened to us by M de Lancry's valet;—the same man who had accompanied me, on that fatal night, to the solitary house beyond Chantilly. This man's countenance was perfectly sinister and hideous.

A small antechamber, encumbered with trunks, in great disorder led to a parlour meanly furnished; on the right, was my husband's room; mine was to the left, with a sort of closet for Blondeau. Such was the apartment I was about to share with M. de Lancry.

The papering of the room was dirty; there were no curtains to the windows, the woodwork was smoked, the uncarpeted floor was almost muddy—the daylight scarcely penetrated into the gloomy court yard. At first, my heart felt fearfully oppressed, and afterward I felt afraid.

This apartment appeared to me deserted, isolated; I looked around me with apprehension. My poor Blondeau did not quit my side, but pressed against me, trembling with fear.

"You find this lodging rather mean, undoubtedly," said M. de Lancry to me, ironically; "but the day for hotels is passed, my dear; we ate all our white bread up first."

"I can accommodate myself to anything, sir. I shall only require some indispensible repairs to be made here."

"At your perfect convenience. I shall not reproach you here, as I did at Maran, as to the insupportable noise made by workmen; for I go out very early in the morning, and return late at night;—sometimes not at all. You will, therefore, do just as you please."

"Then, sir, I shall ask you to keep my footman; he can sleep in the antechamber. He is a trustworthy man. This house is strange to me, and I am very timid."

"If you have the means of paying your servant, arrange it as you will. Fritz sleeps up stairs." Blondeau left us.

"Now, madam, I must declare to you, with that frankness which ought to exist between husband and wife, that all my property now, consists of about three thousand crowns. You have diamonds and jewels, upon which we must raise money. I have, until last year, paid you an income of twenty thousand francs. You cannot have expended the whole of that; for, at Maran, you led a hermit's life."

"But, sir," said I, much alarmed, "it is impossible you can be reduced to such extremity as this."

"When Ursula disappeared, there remained to me about two hundred and fifty thousand francs of our fortune. Almost as much from the despair I felt, as to divert my attention, I tempted fortune. I played—and as I have told you, I played most unfortunately—since I lost all I had. This being once clearly understood, we need speak no farther on the subject. I never think of the money I have spent with pleasure; and still less so of that I have lost by play."

"But, then, sir!" exclaimed I, "is it to share this horrible existence, that you have compelled me to return to you? In what can I be useful to you? You say you are never at home? What is then your aim?" cried I, with terror, and almost regretting that I had voluntarily delivered myself into M. de Lancry's hands.

These regrets were, however, too late and superfluous. I was necessarily obliged to encounter all the consequences of this step; to remain, during some time, chained to the destiny of this man, or to renounce the projects, which alone could give me strength to support my fate.

I could never permit myself to complain to any one, or to ask counsel or assistance from any friend whatever. In the eyes of all, I had come freely, of my own accord, to seek M. de Lancry. All I could do, was to appear happy and satisfied with the lot I had chosen.

My husband replied to the questions I had asked him, in the following terms: "You ask me, my dear wife, what is my aim, in requesting you to return to me: first, that of enjoying your amiable society—and then—and then—it is no business of yours!"

"Then, sir, your projects must be very odious, if you cannot avow them."

"My projects have nothing in common with this question. I have the right to keep you in my house, and I will keep you here. As to any return of your desire to escape out of my hands—whether at this time or later—under the fabulous pretext of a separation, I would request you, for your amusement, to meditate as to this subject, upon a consultation of which this is a copy. It is drawn up by some of the most celebrated lawyers in this city, and cost me a good fifty louis, may it please you. In my position, it was a folly to expend this sum; but I could not pay too dearly for the assurance that I should pass my life with you." He handed me the paper. "You will see that, on the question, as to whether you have the slightest chance of obtaining a separation, the three most learned counsel have unanimously declared—*no!* but they believed they could affirm, that no tribunal would even grant a process on your demand for a separation, if it could be formally proved that you, of your own free will, had returned to the conjugal domicile. Such a step, on your part, would be regarded as a general amnesty for the past, however serious my wrongs toward you may have been. Not expecting, I must acknowledge, to find you so accommodating, I contented myself with the opinion of my three counsel; and I was about to essay another and last attempt at conciliation—of which I felt all the importance—before sending an usher of the court to you. Judge, then, of my astonishment—my delight, when I received from you this charming little note; by which you tell me, that, having maturely reflected, you saw no reason for being any longer separated from me."

I could not restrain an expression of despair, when thinking of this fatal imprudence. This expression did not escape M. de Lancry.

"I perceive you had not thought of this," continued he. "You regret this unlucky little square of paper, glazed and perfumed," said he, with cruel irony, showing me my letter, "which rivets your chain for ever! and which, I much fear, will not be of roses. I am now going to dress myself for today; and, what is unusual with me, I wish to appear quite handsome:" and M. de Lancry left me stupified and alarmed.

I had thought I had committed myself only for the present: but I had irrevocably fixed my future fate!

I thus saw destroyed, for ever, my hope of returning, at a future day, to live with Madame de Richeville—to enjoy, at last, the reward of so many sacrifices, by explaining to M. de Rocheguue the motives of my conduct. This moment was a frightful one.

What M. de Lancry had told me was but too true—that fatal letter had undone me, or it remained as a terrible presumption against me. What reason could I offer to obtain a separation in future, when my husband had in his possession a written proof of my free and voluntary submission to his wishes?

Alas! it was thus that the iron circle of my position, shut me in and bound me on all sides.

Another blow came—if not to overwhelm me still more, yet to prove at least, that my fears regarding Ursula were well founded.

In the evening, while I and my poor Blondeau were making some preparations to pass, without too much alarm, the first night of our residence in this lugubrious apartment, a letter was brought to me, of which the following is a copy:

"Madam—One of your best friends, who, for some time past, has felt great pleasure in keeping you informed of your husband's most secret thoughts, desires to be the first to acquaint you, that it was Ursula who commanded M. de Lancry to recall you to his house, in order to break off your intimacy with M. de Rochegune, of whom she is passionately enamoured.

"Ursula has not seen your husband; she has written to him, that the only means he had of making her consent to grant him further interviews, was to take you home again, and to keep you there. Be it understood, these promises of Ursula are vain; and that poor de Lancry is ignorant that he is thus marvellously serving Ursula's passion, by separating you from de Rochegune.

"There have been seen in the hands of Ursula, the original of a consultation, signed by three celebrated counsellors, and the copy of a letter from you, in which you announce, in the most gracious manner in the world, that you are ready to return to live with M. de Lancry.

"This news, joined to the opinion given to you by the doctor, singularly complicates the question. From all this must result—

"1st. That Emma will die of grief, which cannot fail to be rather afflicting to Madame de Richeville and you, as you will uselessly have sacrificed yourself.

"2nd. That de Rochegune will succumb to the seduction of your friend, Ursula, and which will not be a matter of indifference to you.

"3rd. And that you can never again leave your husband, even when he shall discover that Ursula has made a fool of him. Other motives for retaining you will then be given him. This ought to alarm you, also, if you have the gift of seeing into futurity."

I could not doubt it; this letter was from M. Lugarto.

Such were the obstacles I had to surmount—such were the dangers I had to encounter.

CHAPTER XXII.

CORRESPONDENCE.

When I had more calmly and reasonably examined my position, I felt that it was not so desponding as I had thought.

Being now acquainted with the real motive for M. de Lancry's having insisted upon my return to him, I felt more easy. The anonymous letter, which was doubtless the work of M. Lugarto, showed me the future, under a mysterious menacing aspect: but my mind was too much occupied by the present, to allow me to dwell upon fears for the future.

I did injustice to the character of M. de Rochegune, by supposing him capable of forming even the most ephemeral connection with Ursula. That woman had caused me too much grief, he felt too much hatred and aversion toward her.

To bring about the marriage of Emma, was an almost insurmountable difficulty; and particularly, as it was necessary to conceal from M. de Rochegune, that I knew anything of the passion of that poor child. I, however, looked forward with confidence, and relied upon the inspiration which had already sustained and guided me.

I had no idea of the miserable life to which I was condemned, by the disorderly conduct of M. de Lancry. I appreciated, more fully than ever, the foresight of M. de Mortagne. My estate at Maran had been repurchased, under the name of Madame de Richeville. That property secured to me much more than was necessary for my expenses.

One consequence of my singular position was, that I was obliged to submit to share the same inconveniences as my husband; for, apparently, I possessed nothing of my own. I do not exaggerate, in saying that I resigned myself to this life—almost of poverty—with tolerable indifference. I considered it a trial—an experiment.

Thanks to the care of Blondeau, my gloomy apartment was rendered habitable. I seldom saw M. de Lancry. By occasional fits of boisterous gaiety, or of gloomy depression, I could divine that Ursula had either encouraged or destroyed the hopes he had formed. I hoped, that from the time she no longer commanded him to keep me with him, he would consent to a separation.

My forced residence with my husband did not, therefore, much increase my sorrows. They turned entirely on the loss of M. de Rochegune's affection, and my fears for the future fate of Emma.

Two days after my installation in my new abode, Madame de Richeville came to see me, having had the precaution to assure herself of the absence of M. de Lancry. She burst into tears on perceiving the poverty of my apartment. She told me that this poverty explained to her the reason of my sacrifice. Emma's health was rapidly improving; her mother entertained no longer any doubt of her recovery.

I tremblingly asked Madame de Richeville if she had heard any news of M. de Rochegune; up to that time she had not received any. Foreseeing his grief, she had sent to inquire after his health, and was informed that he was rather indisposed.

Madame de Richeville informed me that my conduct was variously judged of in the world. Some blamed me dreadfully; others lauded me beyond measure. I acknowledge, that, in this circumstance, my own feelings sufficed to balance all these different opinions.

On the following day, I received this letter from M. de Rochegune:

PARIS,——

"I have been unjust, brutal and cruel toward you, because I was full of vanity. Pride is the foundation of all our evil feelings. You felt for another what you did not feel for me. My self-love took the alarm—my good sense was obscured. In your husband, I did not see a man either worthy or unworthy of your love—I saw only a rival.

"All this is logical. I descended from the sphere of elevated sentiments, and fell into that of low and jealous feelings. Paradox had taken the place of reason; could I for ever remain in that sphere? No! platonic love is impossible between two young persons;—sooner or later, one or the other must succumb. It is a dangerous snare—it appears full of charms and grandeur. If your ill-extinguished love for your husband had not sustained your virtue, you would have fallen as I did. When the heart is captivated, it is impossible to escape the contagion of desire.

"I have reflected deeply. *I made myself you,* in order to judge you in an absolutely moral point of view. You are irreproachable. This is a cruel position for me, for I am not permitted, if I may so express myself, even to feel regret. To devote my life to you—to hide our happiness in solitude—because great passions are always fond of solitude. Thus, to me the future would have been complete and magnificent. What now remains to me? Nothing! neither the brother's nor the lover's love. Since I perceived the woman in you, the sister has disappeared.

"The woman, by an abrupt preference, gave evidence of her repugnance—the woman no longer exists for me. To overcome or out-face a repugnance, has always been to me as impossible, as to forget I had inspired it.

"It is with impressions as with days; we cannot say that they have not existed. I can no more again become your brother than I can retrograde to the age of twenty; our position is destroyed—destroyed for ever.

"Your return to your husband has destroyed all equilibrium, overthrown all foresight. Had this return occurred when I was still your brother, it would not have produced the slightest change between us: I should have blamed or approved your conduct disinterestedly.

"I am thirty years of age. I believe that I have loved you since I was eighteen, and I have proved it to you. But the past is fatal for bad as well as good remembrance. If my affection for you has died after this successive transformation, the memory of it will always remain with me. One ought religiously to honour those who no longer exist. Yes; that which I experience toward you at this moment, is the melancholy and sacred worship which we have for those whom we survive.

"My regrets are eternal—once reduced to dust, our remains form unchangeable ashes—such is, such will ever be the immutability of my sentiments for you. I do not reproach you, Matilda; we do not reproach persons for dying—we pity them.

"These images are lugubrious; I employ them, that you may comprehend the past is not to me gloomy, odious, or insupportable. It is frozen like the sepulchre: It is dead! It is not forgotten, it is KILLED!

"My future life must thus be miserable. I waver between twenty different plans, without resolving upon any. Your loss has thrown down all the edifice of my existence. It has to be set up again. Age draws on;—I am tired of the road.

"I had, however, thought that I was near its end. I now must still walk on, and in such a sterile and endless desert!"

"PARIS.——

"Yesterday I had a fit of fury and of hatred, which I was determined to satiate. I was mad. I went out with the intention of insulting your husband and killing him.

"I say this, because I felt the positive conviction that I should kill him—there are presentiments which do not deceive—and then afterward this conviction terrified me; I feared to become an assassin.

"As a proof that I am completely dissevered from you, and that I shall never forget that you have preferred a perverse, wicked, and miserable being to me, is, that I reflected, that by killing your husband, and your becoming a widow by this act of mine, I placed an insurmountable barrier between you and myself.

"This thought would not, of itself, have stayed my arm a moment. Were you free to-morrow, I would refuse the remnant of a life, which you have twice thrown at the feet of this man. Never—never!"

Of these two letters from M. de Rochegune, the last was most painful to me.

It showed me how sure and dreadful had been the blow I had given! Never had he expressed to me in so energetic, so harsh a manner, that complete disseverance which even time could never influence.

This resentment appeared to me to assist me greatly in my projects for Emma; it, at all events, destroyed every obstacle, of which I might have been the pretext.

Ursula still caused me some vague apprehensions. But, I asked myself once more, how M. de Rochegune, who knew her, could for a moment listen to her? Would he not receive her advances with the utmost contempt? I was absorbed in these meditations when I received the following letter from M. Lugarto, or one of his emissaries, for I did not know the handwriting. It is unnecessary to say how much it terrified me.

PARIS.——

"The *unknown* friend, to whom you owe already very much intelligence—at once *agreeable* and valuable regarding the private life of your husband will continue his task with so much the more pleasure, that events appear to follow up his wishes, and become daily more and more *interesting* to yourself.

"You are now about to be informed of all that regards Ursula; because in this phantasmagoria you will presently see appear the form of M. de. Rochegune, and there is reason to believe that this apparition will *please* you infinitely.

"And first: as to what became of Ursula after her disappearance from the hotel de Maran. All that will be concealed from you, will be the particular indication of the present retreat of your charming cousin, because it is superfluous that you should be informed of it. She lives in one of the most retired and distant suburbs of Paris.

"For the last two years, Ursula has had a waiting maid, who is profoundly attached to her, and in whom she has the most unbounded confidence. Mademoiselle Zephyrine, that is her name, had been commissioned by her mistress some time before Lent ball, to seek out and rent, in some very retired quarter, a humble lodging; or, if it could be found, a small and isolated house.

"Mademoiselle Zephyrine, who is a young girl, full of intelligence and zeal, and *faithful, above all*—found, at the bottom of a court, through which there is no thoroughfare, and leading from a deserted street in one of the least frequented suburbs of Paris, a complete trappist's cell. Two days after the mid-Lent ball, your lovely rival abandoning all that she possessed in the hotel de Maran, privately took her departure in a hackney coach, with Mademoiselle Zephyrine, and reached her cenobitical retreat, from which she never departed during fifteen days. During those fifteen days M. de

Lancry was employed in hunting through every corner of Paris, and its environs, without being able to discover his faithless fugitive.

"You shall now have placed before your eyes, some fragments of the most serious thoughts of Ursula, written by her in an album, which has a lock and of which, however, she alone has a key.

"You will conclude, from this indiscretion, without greatly deceiving yourself, that Mademoiselle Zephyrine, during her mistress's walks, finds some means of opening this album; of copying what seems most interesting, and of communicating these particulars to her *invisible master*, who feels great pleasure in imparting them to you.

"The commencement of these fragments of Ursula's journal was written two years' since; the last words of them but a few days ago. It is not doubted that these notes will cause you *sweet* and *salutary* emotions."

URSULA'S JOURNAL.

"This evening I have had a moment's triumph. I saw Matilda at the Italian Opera; her husband came there to rejoin me. I treated him unkindly: she must have perceived it. To take Gontran from her was revenge; to humble him before her, was a pleasure. M. de Senneville is considered in the world as irresistible. He is one of those men upon whom one always has designs when one does not know them. I found his elegance foolishly serious; he must put on his cravat with solemnity, and his sleeves with meditation. His warbling conversation is as charming as it is tedious; for though he chirps deliciously, it is always on the same subject: his greatest defect, in my eyes, is that of being too pretty; this does not constitute a handsome man; and, therefore, M. de Lancry never pleased me. There are merely insipid common-place faces, which nature throws disdainfully into her moulds, and then marks them in packets—PRETTY, No. 1: not giving herself the trouble to bestow on each a separate and original seal. Lord C—— is much better, more accentuated; but his air is too completely English, as is that of almost all his countrymen. It is a mixture of arrogance and embarrassment; of haughtiness and awkwardness; and their moral qualities are like their physical ones—they have no skin; one would say that they feel everything through their flannel."

"Where shall I find that rough, impervious and impassioned man, who, with his robust hand, shall press me as a reed? How do I despise this Gontran! his attentions are base servitudes, his devotion a disgraceful menial drudgery. His love is that of a lackey, who fears to be discharged. What can be expected from a wretch who robs his wife? for 'tis to rob her—meanly to rob her—to ruin himself for me. And she—oh! how I hate her! She does not look unhappy; and I believe it, fool that I am! for I have rid her of her husband."

"Mademoiselle de Maran told me to-day of a saying of the late Duchess de la F——, which was singularly appropriate. On one occasion, when the conversation turned upon Madame de P——, who, before the revolution, was said to have received more than kindly the adoration of the Prince de——, the Duchess of de la F—— exclaimed, 'officers of the royal guard compromise you—clergymen are unbecoming—lawyers are ridiculous, and no more: but princes of the blood royal, or financiers, a woman who respects herself would never think of.'

"To inspire certain persons is very flattering; to disdain them, is still more flattering."

"M. de Volanges, one of my new admirers, has taken upon himself to reproach me with what he calls my coquetry; bitterly complaining, that for two months past, I have received him in the most pleasing manner. Can there be anything in the world more ridiculous than such recrimination? Here is a man, who finds fault with me because I have received him for several weeks with favour, with kindness, and even with preference. Is not the mere acceptance of his attentions a very generous acknowledgment of them? Is it not doing a thousand times more than tenderness? By becoming so indignant against our *bad faith*—by speaking of what they so grotesquely call their rights—the men who have paid their court to us are as simply wicked as those robbers who consider that they themselves have been really robbed, when, by prodigies of patient skill, they find they have broken open an empty coffer."

"I have always considered men as our implacable enemies, both in theory and practice. There is hatred in their mad, passionate love: as soon as passion exists, hatred exists also. The husband of Matilda idolizes me, but he execrates me;—he submits to my yoke, but trembles with anger. He loves me, because he cannot do otherwise than love me. I torture him without pity, because I know the secret of my dominion over him, and that that secret is despicable. And farther still, my hostility to Matilda is excessive. I however experience a certain degree of satisfaction in reflecting, that I am pitiless toward the man who has rendered her so unhappy."

"If we disdain their vows, the men detest us—if we listen to them, they despise us. They never pardon either our virtue or weakness. When they think of paying court to us, they set to work with a whole brain of odious after-thoughts;—there is first vanity, falsehood, jealousy; and afterward come mistrust, hypocrisy; and, above all, the hateful fear of unsuccess. On their part, it is not love; it is scarcely an inclination, a caprice; but, above everything, it is the pride of turning an innocent heart to evil, or of triumphing over their rivals. There is not, perhaps, one man who, having paid attention to the beauty the most in vogue during the season, would not prefer to *appear* successful in the eyes of all, than to be really so upon condition of its remaining a profound secret. They are much more satisfied with the apparent sacrifice of our reputation, than with the unknown sacrifice of our principles. In an equal, or rather relative position, how many men are there who would risk for a woman that which a woman risks in committing an error? As I have read in a modern work, 'If a guilty connection could be easily discovered, and punished by a *fine* which would take away one fourth of the fortune of the *man beloved*, would the man be found who would expose himself to the danger of being loved *so dearly?*'

"I harden myself, therefore, in reflecting that we never inflict on men a greater injury than they would inflict on us."

"The countenance of this actor particularly struck me. He made me understand the sudden bursts of passion. He was resolute, violent, uncontrollable. He performed his part with savage energy and loftiness. When he took that woman by the shoulders—when, with his powerful hand, he threw her upon her knees, he was superb. His brow was threatening, his jealousy was inexorable; and then his manly voice, though rough, had a profound vibration almost *lion-like*. That malicious Princess de Ksernika was with me in the stage-box; she cried out, mockingly, that he appeared to roar. The simpleton! she would, no doubt, have had the lion coo."

"In his love scene, that actor had one moment of admirably powerful expression. He did not stealthily snatch the kiss he took from the young girl—he ravished it in a masterly manner, with audacity, and with almost brutal transport."

"On coming out of the theatre, as I was loud in my praises of Stephen —that is the name of the actor—while the Princess de Ksernika was attacking him as ably as she could, poor woman, must not M. de Lancry take it into his head to observe to me, though in the most respectful manner, it is true, that I had defended Stephen rather warmly? I looked at him fixedly with one of my black looks; he saw the fault he had committed, but it was too late. I then give him one of my sweetest smiles, and leaning coquettishly upon his arm, I whispered to him softly—very softly—that I should write to Stephen the next morning to give me lessons in declamation, as the desire to study acting had suddenly seized upon me. I am not going, as may well be imagined, to do anything of the kind. *The husband of Matilda*, perfectly astounded with this cruel intimation, was so much moved by it as to call out, with mortified surprise, 'This new caprice is certainly very singular!' I smiled more sweetly than before; and predicted that he would himself go the next morning, to take a box for me to see Stephen play again in the same piece; and that I wished to have a small theatre immediately constructed in the garden of the hotel de Maran."

"That these orders will be executed I unfortunately do not doubt; this Gontran is so cowardly and so much a fool, that he never gives me the variety of a refusal, or tells me that any thing I ask is impossible. He is like my mare Stella—she is so well broken, that her docility irritates me. I beat her from rage, that I have not any cause to beat her!"

"M. de Lancry's architect has been with me to lay before me several plans of theatres. I did not find them sufficiently splendid; I want something that will recall, in smaller proportions, the theatre at the palace of Versailles; and above all, that it should be built immediately. The pillow is a good counsellor: a little while ago I told *the husband of Matilda*, that instead of hiring a box for me for to-morrow night only, at the theatre where Stephen acts, he must take it for six months—to have the right of fitting it up properly, for this small theatre of the boulevards is horribly dirty. Well, I think of going there now and then. The furniture, looking-glass, and hangings, will all be in their places by to-morrow. Gontran has thirty-six hours to do it in—he, the man of magnificent surprises! it is more time than he can require."

"I have just returned from the embassy, This ball was marvellousy fine; I never looked more beautiful, and yet I was almost killed by *ennui*. How insipid and monotonous are the attentions with which they overwhelm me! And then, to say to one's self, I have but to express my will, and all these creatures now apparently so tenderly devoted to their mistresses or their wives, would leave them and fly to me—such facility is perfectly repulsive. To give piquancy or excitement to an amour, there should be principles to overcome or obstacles to surmount. Alas! I am reduced to obstacles; but I am too much the vogue, and the men are too grossly, too easily rendered unfaithful to *their loves*, for me to meet with any. Oh! if I could only find one being insensible to my seductions, what glory would it be to triumph over him."

"This thought has put me out of humour; *my court* has perceived it—I was nervous, irritable. My ill-nature spared neither sex; I quarrelled right and left, and said ill-natured things which much amused Mademoiselle de Maran. She decidedly doats upon me, but mutual hatred for Matilda, has completely *soldered* us together. And besides, I amuse her—she grows old, and has a horror of solitude, to which her malignity will necessarily consign her. It concerns me but little to think that I may one day abandon her, should fate call me elsewhere."

"The *husband of Matilda* has surpassed himself; I found my box magnificently fitted up; the back part of it was occupied by an immense flower-stand, (a useful precaution at this theatre.) But to what purpose? I shall never put my foot again into that theatre. My illusions are destroyed—the second time I saw this play, Stephen, who had at first so struck me—so much affected me, appeared to me detestable, ugly, and vulgar; what had become then of my judgment and my eyes? But still I do not regret my first impression, so different from the second—it gave me the idea of having a theatre, and I am delighted at the thought of performing in a play."

"I have just played Célimené. My little theatre is quite beautiful. According to our audience, I recited well, and played with dignity. It is very amusing. It appears that in Mademoiselle Dejazet's part in the farce, I turned all their heads, by my piquancy and effrontery. How stupid and vain men are! When they are delighted to see a woman evince an impudent boldness, they imagine that this affectation of shamelessness is addressed to them, and that they may profit by it. They do not understand, then, in their stupid fancy, that the more one ventures to do before them, the less do we account them. After this little piece, the *husband of Matilda* approached me, with a self-sufficient air, thinking, perchance, that my selection of this part was a *declaration of principles*, which he might take advantage of. I received him in such a manner, that he left me, confused and abashed."

"The life I lead here is sometimes intolerable, from its nothingness and ennui. And yet, in the eyes of all, and even in my own, there is not an existence more fortunate than mine. I have, at length, enjoyed that luxury—

that renown for elegance—which I so much coveted. I am a woman of fashion, in the most extended acceptation of the term. I reign supreme over a fraction of the best society of Paris ; the most amiable among men are at my feet ; my rivals fear and execrate me ; I am sufficiently superior to them to be always *trés bonne femme,* very obliging toward them, and I give the finishing blow to their despair, by profoundly disdaining the lover whom they envy me, and by defying them to attempt to subvert a fidelity which I laugh at. Like the usurping conquerers, I have alone made myself what I am. Of a name, almost ridiculous, I have made a symbol of elegance and distinction. They copy my mode of dress, my repartees are recited ; they envy me my successes ; my preference gives a man fashion ; my derision sinks him for ever. ! When I make my appearance in a ball-room, all the women, with an eager hand, keep their adorers fast *in leash,* and I see only looks of hatred and of jealousy. I hear around me nothing but acrimonious whispers, or angry reproaches. But, should only a flower fall from my nosegay, all these adorers break their leading-strings, and simultaneously rush forward to pick it up, to the great mortification of an infinity of *fine ladies,* who in vain endeavour to recall these bewildered ingrates. All this is delightful ; and yet, something is wanting to me ; or, rather, all is wanting. I do not love ; I have never loved. Oh ! how I wish I could love."

"I, one day, thought I felt one of those silent, but profound emotions, which announce the storm of passions, as the first rollings of the thunder announce the tempest. But, alas ! this hope was also vain. How ridiculously bombastic is my comparison ! And yet, a man like the one whom I remember, would have understood how I desired to be loved, and I would have abandoned all for him. Doubtless, I should have lived in misery, in abjection, in tears ; he might have beaten, betrayed me, driven me from him ; but, at least, I should have loved—I should have had some moments of sublime passion—I should have felt myself raised in my own esteem."

"*Raised!* Is it, then, a secret instinct, which informs me that grief, like fire, purifies ? Can it, then, be a return to virtue that I seek for, in such a passion ? No, no ! I have no remorse ! I should not—I will not feel it. Once, once, I felt pity for Matilda. I was as good, as generous toward her, as my nature would permit, and I was cruelly punished for it.

"How can I do otherwise than hate M. de Lancry ? Sometimes, in spite of myself—but this is on my melancholy days—I feel blushes of shame rising to my forehead, in thinking that it is from his odious ingratitude to his wife, that I owe the splendid life I lead. In vain I endeavour to make a compromise with my conscience ; in vain, I say to myself, that nothing can be more *immaterial* than the pleasures I enjoy. In vain I have treated the *husband of Matilda* as a miserable wretch, from the day he offered me more than flowers or serenades. Oh ! there are cups, of which to drink, is gall and bitterness !"

"At last, I am stricken to the heart ;—yes, to the heart ! I will write down this date. From this day forward, whether happy or unhappy, my life of love commences. At last, I have found the man I have so often figured in my dreams. He did not see me ; he only passed me. I know not even his name, nor what he is ; but be he the first or last of men, I feel that I shall love him ; I feel that I do love him—that I am his alone. What a proud and noble countenance !—a step at once so light and manly !—and that bronzed complexion, and those red lips, and those black eyelashes, and those large grey eyes ! And when such eyes as those deign but to look on you, you should kneel down, exclaiming : 'Command me, lord ! here is your slave !' But this unknown—who can he be ?"

"What is this invisible and mysterious power which I obey ? This man has not addressed a word to me. He did not even look upon me ; and yet I feel myself humbled—overpowered. My profound anguish tells me that my fate is accomplished."

"There can be nothing less romantic than was my meeting with this unknown. I was crossing the Tuileries on foot. When I got into one of the walks, I saw before me a man walking slowly. His figure and his air had already struck me as remarkable ; he turned round, as though he had inadvertently taken a wrong direction. Then, oh ! then, on noticing his aspect, I could not avoid stopping. He did not perceive me, but walked on. Although no longer there, I still gazed after him."

"Who is this?—who is this man? I have never met him in society; but that does not concern me—I know that he exists. Shall I ever again behold him? Yes, yes; otherwise I never should have met him. He exists, and this explains and justifies my contempt for all other men—yes, for all! Those men who have imagined that they had some claim upon me, are they not those on whom I have showered disdain and outrage? Have they ever gained —I will not say empire—but the slightest influence over my heart—my soul—my understanding? Is not a studied carelessness the acme of indifference and insult? The *husband of Matilda* has said it, and has proved it: a man is not a slave."

"Oh! eternal misery! It is the lover of Matilda; it is the Marquis de Rochegune—the singular and remarkable man of whom all the world is speaking—who has arrived within the last few days, and with whom I was so anxious to become acquainted. It is he! it is he! He loves Matilda; she loves him! Oh! when I said that I had a reason, that I had a right, to hate that woman! This is then the secret of that implacable hatred which I have felt for her, even from her infancy! My instinct told me that she would one day love the man, to love whom would become my fate!"

"She loves him! She! but she is unworthy of him. Has she not loved —passionately loved, her insipid and miserable Gontran? Oh, how proud am I!—I, that have never loved till now! How proud am I, that I have felt I never ought to love till I could see my master—my sovereign! And I complained; but it is on my knees, on both my knees, I ought to thank my fate, which, until now, has rendered me insensible to love!"

"I hold myself in horror, and all that now surrounds me. Now do I feel that I am a wretched, a degraded creature. Never will such a man even cast down his eyes upon me. It is now that I can measure the depth of the abyss of filthiness and infamy into which I have fallen. I shall never be able to wash away this stain. With what stupid paradoxes have I lulled my spirit? To consider myself worthy of him!—I! what profanation! Should I ever dare to look upon him?—to speak to him? To speak to him! why, I should die with shame! Ah! now I can understand what timidity is, or, rather, shame!"

"I will no longer remain in the house of Mademoiselle de Maran. This elegance disgusts me. I wish to hide myself from all eyes. To enjoy these luxuries, I have sold myself, like an infamous creature. The unfortunates, whom want has conducted to their ruin, are angels in comparison to me. I hate the light of day; it appears that, in the dark, I do not so bitterly feel my ignominy. How much he loves her! How much she loves him! What generosity! What softness! What courage! What a blaze of honour—of patriotism—of chivalric loyalty—surrounds the noble name of this man! With the mere thought of it, my eyes are dazzled! And Matilda, how much she is beloved! how much her conduct is approved! how much is she admired for loving him so much! How magnificent the union of two such souls as theirs! Their love, how grand and pure! And that Gontran, that Gontran, who mocks at them!—is he capable of understanding them? Heaven be thanked! he cannot comprehend them."

"I am mad! Concealed in a carriage, I went again, and spent two hours before his house, hoping to see him come out—to see him—only to see him! For all the world, I would not expose myself to meet his eye in public. I should die of terror and of shame. I could not even stammer out a word. For a month past I have abandoned all society. I rarely even go down to Mademoiselle de Maran's room, where I am, however, very certain not to meet him. I watched for a long time at his door; he went out on foot. I followed him in the coach, where I remained concealed. He went to Matilda's house; he remained there till six o'clock. How happy must she be! I have no longer strength to envy or to hate her. I can only suffer. In spite of myself, I am obliged to acknowledge that they are worthy of each other."

"Weep! weep! unhappy woman! weep tears of blood and anger! Away!

and die despairing. Above all, tell no one of thy insane passion—insult and derision would surely be thy portion.

"Oh! had I but sooner met this man, how different would have been my life! It would then have been as pure and honourable, as it has been guilty and dissolute. At all events, it shall not continue to be so. He shall never know me—he shall never know I love him; but the first flame he has lighted up within me will have purified my life. I have this day taken measures to leave the hotel de Maran. I will abandon everything. I will be poor. I will support myself by the labour of my hands, or I will die! but I will be free, and worthy to think of him—to think of him! Oh! that will require the observance of great duties."

"All my energies are awakened; to-morrow I will abandon this house—but this night I will speak to him! Yes! I will have so much courage. An idea has struck me—it is the mid-Lent ball at the opera. I will give him a rendezvous. My letter shall be so conceived, that he will think it regards some timid and unfortunate person. I am certain he will come. Shall I have the courage to accost him? I know not. At this sole reflection, all my fears—my doubts, return. Ah! I am a coward. I fear, I tremble! with what emotion shall I one day re-peruse the lines I am now writing. It seems to me, that on this mute paper, in these rapid notes, I shall find my almost living thoughts. How happy am I, thus to be able to preserve a visible trace of that which passes in my mind this day—this hour!"

"I have spoken to him—gracious Heaven! I have spoken to him! He felt the beatings of my heart. My lips have timorously kissed his hand—his noble hand! my tears have moistened it. He was pleased to answer me with kindness. The favour of a sovereign was never received with a more fervent gratitude; never were royal words heard, and devoured with a more eager and trembling attention; my mask restored my courage: without it, I could not have uttered a single word. I was in a high state of fever; my cheeks were crimsoned. He took pleasure in listening to me, because I praised Matilda. These praises seared my lips; but I became eloquent—to praise her still more highly. I saw him smile with bitter contempt and aversion, when I pronounced my own name. To please him still more, I indignantly branded with infamy, the whole of my past conduct; and I could not find expressions sufficiently bitter for my accusation. Oh! how keenly did I feel this despairing bitterness; never before, had I so painfully perceived the immeasurable distance which the past had placed between me and this majestic man."

"And then, while I was lauding her whom he most cherished, and uttering imprecations against her whom I detested, he appeared so happy. Oh! had he, at that moment, told me to love Matilda, I believe I should have loved her. And he—what qualities he possesses! what wit! what grace! what genius! what lofty thoughts! His fearless spirit applies to objects, which require the possession of rare and difficult virtues—that adventurous audacity—that presumptory energy, which others apply to easy and vulgar vices; he made me comprehend the most pure and most holy exaltations of the mind: he conferred upon me a high nobility of soul, as a monarch who dispenses chivalric dignities."

"I have abandoned the hotel de Maran. I shall never again see M. de Lancry. I have at last withdrawn myself from that atmosphere of shame and degradation, which suffocated me. I would not now exchange my humble dwelling for all the palaces in the world."

"M. de Rochegune will never see me, I shall never again hear his voice. Never shall he know that he has spoken with kindness and benevolence to the woman, whom he despises—whom he detests more than any being in the world. And yet, I shall always be as passionately faithful to him, as lovingly devoted, as if he had permitted me to love him. Oh! yes, yes! I can understand the purity of their loves, better, perhaps, than Matilda can understand it. Yes! I should now, perhaps, be more capable than she is, of the sacrifices which such a love demands. With her, a virtuous resolution is only the consequence of her principles. To fail in it, would merely be a dereliction from her duty. I—I henceforward, shall never fail; because principle, honour, chastity, and modesty, have all been revealed, have been conferred upon me by this man; and that it would be *he*, and not virtue, whom I must so forget."

"I am terrified by the ravages which this passion is making within me; my mind wanders—the most gloomy projects float though my heated brain. Oh! did he but know my love, he would pity me. Yes; I am sure that he would love me—that he would prefer me to Matilda. After all, what influence has he exercised upon that woman? None! She was good and pure—she has remained good and pure. But I—I was depraved and lost; and because I have seen him—and because he has spoken some few words of kindness and of goodness to me—and because I love him—I have become as pure—as good—as is Matilda. And who can tell, whether she has continued pure? Oh! had she committed but one fault, how much prouder would he be of his influence over me. Of the virtuous Matilda he would have made merely a guilty woman; and me though guilty, he would have rendered virtuous! Would not that be much more great? would it not have been worthy of his loftiness of soul? He who loves all that is generous and noble—would he be insensible to the transformation he had produced?"

"Yes, it is true; he has transformed me; he has taught me to feel remorse, which I had hitherto not known. My conduct toward my husband appears to me in all its horrors. My heart is broken, when I think of that generous and devoted being, who loved me with so much idolatry, and whom I abandoned for a man I despised."

"Formerly, I should not have hesitated a moment in adopting the resolution which I have now taken. Well! during two days I have struggled; oh! how painfully have I struggled! but the interests of my love have conquered. This love has now become my life. It is not egotism—it is not cruelty—it is the instinct of self-preservation. I have a certain means of separating M. de Rochegune from Matilda. I will write to Gontran, without telling him where I am—I will promise to see him again, if he will prevail upon Matilda to return to live with him. I know, that by this step, I run the risk of carrying these passions to extremities—of, perhaps, compelling them to fly together, to escape M. de Lancry; but I cannot be more wretched than I am. I can lose nothing by this measure—I may gain everything.

"Gontran will not dare to refuse my request; my influence over him is absolute: of this I am positive. But when Matilda shall once more be in the power of M. de Lancry, what have I then to do? Shall I dare to meet the look of him, whose very idea fills my soul with consternation, with trouble and delight? Does he not passionately love Matilda? If he should only suspect that I have been the cause of her returning to her husband—what horror; what hatred would he feel toward me! Well: he could not hate me then more than he hates me now! Oh! 'tis an abyss! but no matter: I now risk my last, my only hope!"

"What a miracle! Can it be a dream? It is scarcely four days since I wrote to M. de Lancry, and I have received from him, to the address which Zephyrine had given him, not only the assurance that Matilda would live with him henceforward, but, moreover, a letter from herself, in which she freely and voluntarily takes the determination which I had considered would have cost her more than life. Once more, can it be a dream? I sent Zephyrine, who is acquainted with one of M. de Rochegune's servants to make enquiries."

"Zephyrine has just returned. I tremble! I am alarmed! There is happiness so sudden—so overwhelming—that one can hardly credit it—it terrifies one!

"For four days, M. de Rochegune, absorbed by violent grief, has not been to see Matilda. She has once more become madly in love with her husband; all the world speak of it. Can it be possible? Oh! no! I cannot yet believe it. Should it be so—oh! should it be so—my fondest hopes may still be realized!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE RENDEZVOUS.

AFTER reading these fragments, which allowed me to dive into the most secret thoughts of Ursula, I remained for a short time so bewildered, that I could not continue the reading of M. Lugarto's letter.

I was struck with the sincerity—the violence of my cousin's passion for M. de Rochegune. Was this, indeed, the same woman who, in the first passages of this journal, had penned so many bold and shameless confessions? According to my usual habit of exaggerating all my fears, I severely felt several of the observations made by Ursula. What she said of the salutary influence M. de Rochegune had experienced over her, appeared to me but too true. Perhaps he might feel much interested in the marvellous change which he had operated.

However odious and paradoxical might be the comparison which Ursula had made, in saying that I had loved M. de Lancry, while on the contrary, she had *never loved him;* in saying, also, that she had never loved at all till she had seen M. de Rochegune; I found some truth in this mode of reasoning, placing myself in her position, who, up to that moment, had never professed any principle, and for whom certain faults had not existed, so much had been her criminal indifference for all her duties.

My anxiety redoubled, when I reflected that my conduct toward M. de Rochegune must have produced in his mind a mistrust and scepticism as to all faith in woman.

After having been so deceived, being thrown into a sea of painful and bitter doubt, would he not become, more accessible to the fascinations of Ursula? Would he not see in a connection with her a species of revenge against me, who had rendered him so wretched? a sort of cutting raillery against fate, which had so mocked his dearest expectations?

Wishing to ascertain precisely all that awaited me, I continued the perusal of M. de Lugarto's letter, which went on thus:

"Here end the fragments of Ursula's journal, which your *unknown friend* deems necessary to give you knowledge of; what Ursula may have added to them since your voluntary return to yonr husband, consists merely of reflections—of thoughts, more or less ardent, on the subject of her love.

"From what is known of her projects, she is now occupied in finding out the means to obtain a rendezvous with M. de Rochegune. As she loves passionately, as you may have remarked—as there is always an irresistible fascination in true love—as Rochegune is furious against you in particular and against all virtuous women in general; your dear cousin, who is no fool, understands that her hour is come, and that her consolations will arrive at an excellent moment; and it is therefore she exclaims, '*My fondest hopes may still be realized.*'

"Men are such animals, that de Rochegune will necessarily allow himself to be caught in the nets of your cousin—ha! ha! You see that this is becoming highly comic; all the heroic sacrifices which have been imposed upon you by the disclosure of Dr. Gerard, will terminate to the great advantage and satisfaction of Madame Ursula. With regard to that revelation of the love of Emma—a love which, according to the eternal usage of all lovers, had precisely escaped the suspicion of Madame de Richeville, of M. de Rochegune and your own; seeing that the persons the most interested in *knowing* the existence of a feeling are necessarily those who are most completely *ignorant* of it—with regard to this love, as I before said, It had not completely escaped the notice of one of your friends; he spoke of it as a vague idea; it was a ray of light. True or false, this revelation combined with the malady of Emma, must have dreadfully tormented you in your love, and have thrown the apple of discord between you, Emma, and perhaps Madame de Richeville. A good part of these predictions has been verified.

"Now then, let us sum up. I shall, therefore, speak in my own name, for you must have recognized me by the *interest* I manifested toward you. Let us now consider the comparative strength and weakness of your position.

"I can do all against you—you can do nothing against me. At every issue where you think you can escape me, you will find me barring your passage, and implacable.

"Consider this: If, dismayed at finding your motives thus penetrated, if, dreading the influence which Ursula may attain over M. de Rochegune, you should avow to the latter the reasons for your sacrifice; first, Emma dies—that is as clear as daylight; second, you cannot escape from your husband to join your platonic friend, until the death of Gontran: legally, your letter prevents you from ever hoping for a separation. As to escaping secretly, you are watched; your husband would be informed of it on the instant, and *excellent reasons have latterly been given him for never leaving you.*

"What say you to the inextricable labyrinth into which you have thrown yourself? But stay: I will set before you a comparison, the appropriateness of which you will certainly acknowledge.

"It appears to me, that at the moment of reading these lines, you will figure to yourself that you are like a little fly, fallen into the centre of a spider's web; every effort that it makes to break through the murderous netting, serves but to entangle it still more. To complete the horror of its position, in the midst of this infernal web, it perceives the hideous spider, which, steeped in murder, remains immoveable;—its red eyes gloating upon its victim, and delighting in its mortal struggles before devouring it."

At this passage of that execrable letter, I could not avoid uttering a shriek of terror, so just did this comparison appear to me; so truly did I feel myself encircled and constrained by some invisible and fatal power! Any palpable danger, however formidable it might have been, would have less terrified me than these hidden and mysterious machinations, by which I was threatened, and of which experience had already revealed the danger.

I went on with the letter, fearing at each moment that it would drive me mad, so much was I terrified.

"Do you know, dear Matilda, that I should be a great writer, without suspecting it, if, precisely at the passage of this letter, you should have felt one of those terrors such as formerly used to seize me, when a youth, while reading some of the horrible positions in Ann Ratcliffe's romances? Ha! ha! that is not impossible, however, for probably you are reading this alone in that melancholy and gloomy apartment of the rue de Bourgogne, which I have visited, be it understood, before you came to occupy it. To give you a proof of what I now advance, examine well the wainscoting to the left of the chimney piece. Well, have you looked at it?"

I stopped reading, and meditatively looked toward the wainscoting; and although I could not perceive anything which should have alarmed me, I trembled on recalling to my mind the lonely house. I then continued reading, with a horrible palpitation of my heart.

"Now, approach the chimney; push with all your strength against the wood-work adjoining it, and you will see something which will surprise you."

Terrified and amazed, I called Blondeau. "Gracious heavens! madam!" cried she, "what is the matter with you?" Without being able to reply to her, I pointed to the panel in the wainscoting, with a terrified look.

"But again, madam, what is the matter with you? you quite frighten me."

Encouraged by her presence, I pushed against the moulding of the wainscot, it gave way. I screamed aloud. Blondeau, as frightened as myself, did the same. The wood-work moved by a secret spring, gently opened. I saw a recess, large enough to contain one person. A pipe, communicating with the flue of the chimney, admitted sufficient air for a person to breathe.

"My good Heavens, madam! what can all this mean?" screamed Blondeau, turning pale.

"Silence! silence! Shut it up again, and say not a word to any one about it." She closed the panel, and I continued reading the letter, doubtful whether I was awake or dreaming.

"Well! you have seen my hiding-place? you must have been pretty well frightened! Imagine then, how many such I have around you, if I so readily make this one known to you. Come now, you may be tranquil; I have no others—believe it Do you understand me—believe it, for it will help you to sleep quietly--it is true. This is a new joke, played in the hope of giving you terrific dreams—some nightmare, that shall be enough to frighten you to death. You will now imagine to yourself, that this house *which belongs to me*—is nothing but traps and counter-traps, as at the opera-house, or in the novels of Ducre Dumesnil. What is delightful in the matter is, that should you take it into your head to ask your husband to change your lodgings, he would treat you as a visionary—ha! ha! you will have some beautiful nights! How sweetly will this assist you to repose after your *diurnal* sorrows! I advise you to make your faithful Blondeau mount guard over you. Yes—but the soporific—do you recollect the soporific? ha! ha! you will be afraid to touch anything that is brought you, from your humble *restaurateur's*—who, perhaps, is also one of my faithful ones. By-the-bye, what a falling off, for a woman who had one of the first establishments in Paris! You must acknowledge, however, that the power which money gives us, is a delightful thing. Were I Satan, *in propria persona,* I could not torment you more. You will now be assailed by constant terrors; your sleep will be disturbed by horrible dreams during the day—you will be harassed by the diabolical complexity of your position. Finally, night nor day will you enjoy a single moments of repose—added to which, the future is charged with clouds, so dark, so black, so stormy, that your forebodings cannot but be direful. Ha! ha! ha!

"All this, at least, is not rose-coloured—but, also, you must acknowledge, I have skilfully availed myself of all my chances! Besides this, hatred, and the thirst for vengeance, doubles the facilities. And, in all conscience, it is a little your own fault. Do you remember that night, when, in your presence, I was insulted, beaten—when I begged for pardon on my knees, with clasped hands? You might well expect I should revenge myself, and I am now beginning!

"But, now I have gained experience, I only play upon a certainty; and, above all, I am always *lucky*. Look at Mortagne—I was five hundred leagues off, when he must go and quarrel with a bully, whom I had no more seen than Eve or Adam, and who shoots him out of my way! Truly, such things happen to no one but me.

"At this moment, even, I defy you to produce this letter against me! Will you apply to the laws? In the first place, *I am not in Paris;* and then, where is the substance of the offence? A pure little love affair, more or less platonic, with which justice has no right to interfere: and, notwithstanding—how droll it is! these little love affairs are full of tears, despairs, and, perhaps, murders and suicides, and I know not what.

"Whereupon, a good and peaceful night do I wish to you—the sweet slumber of an infant, sleeping upon its mother's breast!

"AN UNKNOWN FRIEND, OR A KNOWN
"ENEMY—*at your own choice.*"

The perusal of this letter left me in a state of painful excitement—my ideas buzzed about my brain, without finding any issue.

With demoniacal sagacity, M. Lugarto replied, in advance, to all my objections—awakened all my fears. On thinking that Ursula might captivate M. de Rochegune, my despair knew no bounds. If Emma must be last, exclaimed I, may I not, at least, be the victim of an useless sacrifice! At one moment, I was on the point of communicating everything to M. de Rochegune; I was about to write to him, when that divine voice which always came to aid my vacillating resolution, said to me—'Courage, courage! do not allow thyself to be cast down—turn thy eyes away from the abyss which a monster has displayed before thee, only to cause a frightful giddiness, and to shake thy noble resolutions. Look not at thy feet, but raise thine eyes to heaven! Place thy trust in God—he will not fail thee! If the man whom thou hast believed worthy of thee, were capable of yielding to the seductions of Ursula, could'st thou regret his heart? could'st thou envy that woman? If Emma die from seeing that another is preferred to her, let it not be thou that inflicteth the fatal blow: remain true to her, and thou mayest console her. Should'st thou not succeed—should she succumb, do not forget her mother, who has been to thee almost a mother. As to the mysterious manner of this monster, let that not terrify thee; drive away all vain fears—be courageous, strong, look steadily forward; and see how he can harm thee, and thou wilt despise his vengeance. Once more, courage; yet one step more—perhaps the recompense of so many sacrifices is not far distant.'

Thus, as always, my resolution returned, after a passing discouragement. I determined upon awaiting the course of events; and to still encourage Emma's hopes, and protect myself, by every possible means, from the dangerous snares and circumventions of M. Lugarto.

I made Blondeau sleep in my room. I examined the wainscoting, and I reassured myself a little by the reflection, that had this man intended to take advantage of any of these machinations he would not have warned me of them. He, doubtless, only wished to occasion me unceasing alarms.

I seldom saw M. de Lancry—his gloomy air, his impatient and irritable humour, proved that Ursula did not keep the promises she had made to him; but that she had sufficient art still to lead him on, to induce him to retain me with him.

Without informing him of the letter from M. Lugarto, I showed him the recess in the wainscoting—he shrugged his shoulders, and made me this incredible answer, and with a sardonic air which quite alarmed me; "It is some good citizen's wife who has no doubt had this secret cupboard built to hide her provisions from the voracity of her servants."

About a fortnight after I received the letter above cited from M. Lugarto, he addressed me the following note:

PARIS, 4 o'clock.

"I did not wish to tell you anything, before being perfectly assured of the fact. Rochegune has, to-morrow, a rendezvous with Ursula; not at her house, but on the outer boulevard—for a beginning, this is more decent.

"This rendezvous is at nine o'clock; they are to meet on the boulevard to the left of the Fontainebleau gate, and to the left as you go out of the said gate."

Overcome by this intelligence—which, however, I could not still believe—the next morning I got into a hackney-coach and went to the stated place. I saw Ursula, who was waiting—a few minutes afterward M. de Rochegune arrived; he offered her his arm, and both of them disappeared in a cross-street which came out on the boulevard.

I had neither the strength nor the will to follow them. I returned home in indescribable despair.

CHAPTER XXIV.

CONFIDENCES.

ABOUT six weeks had elapsed, since I discovered the interview of Ursula with M. de Rochegune. I waited for the latter in the park of Monceaux, where I had met him on a former occasion. He had entreated me to be there on that morning, as he had something very important to tell me. Our conversation was to have reference to important facts, which had transpired during a considerable interval. In learning these occurrences, and especially those which our conversation brought to light, you will understand why I pass over intermediate events, to come more quickly to those passages, which console me for many of my afflictions, and which I cannot, even at this distant hour, recall without sentiments of melancholy happiness.

M. de Rochegune was several minutes before me at the place of meeting. "You are most good and amiable to come," said he; "there is no one in the world, but yourself, whom I can consult about what occurs to me."

"And Ursula, by-the-bye," said I.

He made a gesture of disdainful impatience, and replied: "Always engaged in the same absurd pursuit. She has, I am told, again passed the whole night in a hackney-coach outside of my door."

"And does not this love move you?" He shrugged his shoulders. "Ah!" continued I, "I still shudder when I call to mind, that only six weeks ago, I saw you meet her at the place she had appointed, take her arm, and disappear with her."

"Are you not aware of the cunning of that woman? She knows that your name is a talisman, by the use of which I can always be affected. The first time she wrote to me, and signed herself the '*Unknown one of the Opera,*' signifying that she had several matters of the utmost importance to communicate to me, about you. I hastened to the rendezvous; judge of my disagreeable surprise, when I recognized the woman who had caused you so many sorrows. I so poorly dissembled the repugnance with which she inspired me, that she trembled and grew pale; then recovering herself, she asked my pardon for having disturbed me to no purpose. She could not at that time impart to me the information with regard to yourself, which she had promised; but, if I would return there the day after the morrow, she would, to some extent, satisfy me. I do not know, whether by design or not, but she had led me to suspect, by certain ambiguous givings out, that your rejoining your husband was owing to some mysterious cause. Then, Matilda, I had, in spite of myself, preserved some glimmerings of hope; so I consented to see your cousin once more, that I might have the secret which she, perhaps, possessed."

"I comprehend her aim, my friend. The first blow had been given; you had already almost overcome your repugnance to her; she relied upon her addresses, and her wit, to make indifference glide into love."

"She was by no means deficient in skill; but you do not yet know everything."

"How is that?"

"Please to hear me. The second and third interviews were as futile as the first; but, by delaying every time to furnish me with that intelligence, which concerned both you and myself, as she said, your cousin always contrived to recur to that cruel truth;—that you were now more than ever attached to your husband. The knowledge which she had, both of him and you, gave too much appearance of truth to her asseverations; if it had been possible for me to have kept up the least allusion on the subject, Ursula would have banished it for ever. I know not why this last shock, foreseen as it had been, afflicted me severely and revived all my anger against you; but I ought to do your cousin the justice to say, that she never spoke of you, except with great respect."

"She knew that you would not put up with any other language."

M. de Rochegune looked at me in a strange manner, and resumed, after a few moments silence; "Perhaps;—I was so unhappy; all the wounds of my heart began to bleed afresh."

"How! would you have suffered Ursula to defame me?—you, my friend? I do not believe it."

"All that is passed now, Matilda. I can confess to you my weakness, my cowardice."

"Explain yourself, pray."

"Well! when, after our last interview, she had persuaded me of your renovated passion for your husband, I experienced a sensation, almost of hatred, toward you! While comparing you—you who are so pure, with Ursula, profligate as she is, I said to myself; may be, if I had loved this woman, notwithstanding her depravity, she would have caused me less grief than Matilda."

"Ah! my friend, what blasphemy!"

"I must display the whole truth to you; it will be my punishment. I was in the midst of the indignation, which your desertion had created, when I again reasoned with myself. After all, the wrong Ursula has inflicted on Matilda is at an end, since the latter now dotes on her husband more passionately than ever. Does she not pardon Ursula at the same time that she pardons M. de Lancry? Why should I be more harsh than Matilda, herself, is?"

"How! could you abuse yourself with such paradoxes!"

"Despair is a bad counsellor, Matilda. What can I say? While in that wicked mood, I spoke, with a kind of hateful satisfaction, some kind words to that woman, your most mortal enemy. I gratified myself by remembering the elasticity, the brilliancy of her wit."

"And Ursula, I dare say, responded to your confidence?" said I, bitterly.

"Happily, I found her stupid."

"Ursula!"

"Yes."

"What! she? so fascinating?—so engaging?—so spiritual?—so manœuvering?—is it possible?"

"I repeat to you, Matilda, I found her stupid. There was no longer that shadow on her spirit, which struck me at the opera; she stammered forth some disconnected phrases. Nothing could be more heavy or dull, than her conversation, after it ceased to refer to you. She wanted to launch out in grand dissertations on impassioned love, and the chances of constancy and virtue, which were as disgusting as they were ridiculous in her mouth. What could be more maladroit than this absurd string of fine maxims, from a woman in her position? It made me angry, when I should, perhaps, in the bad humour I was in, have been diverted by those cynical, paradoxical, insolent, and mocking sallies of wit, which she can so well execute. I was in one of those fits of bitter discouragement, which makes you doubt all things that are generous and great, and was possessed with a desire to trample under foot all you have venerated. Why may I not now confess it to you? for the peril is past."

"Well!" said I to him, shuddering at these reminiscences.

"Well, Matilda, I confess it with all shame. At that moment the audacious and perverse words of Ursula might have had a fatal and powerful influence upon me. And who can tell the consequences of a first impression? But I should have encountered a sort of charming devil of wit, and gentleness, mixed with effrontery; a pretty woman, attractive and unscrupulous; and not with a species of psalm-singing, country beneficiary, uttering virtuous proverbs, with red eyes, pallid skin, and a die-away, parched up physiognomy."

"And did not this complete revolution in the manners and character of Ursula, affect you in the least?"

"Not the least in the world, my dear Matilda. This sudden change was either real or feigned; if it were true, it was a demonstration of love—but it is not very flattering to excite even an earnest passion in the breast of Madame Ursula Secherin. If this vexation, this embarrassment were feigned, it was an ignoble hypocrisy. No, I repeat it, the only chance for your cousin would have been, boldly to show herself just what she is—a type of impudence and perversity. Then, perhaps, while still irritated by a grievous deception—drawn on by an aggravated curiosity, seeking for sad contrast; I might have wished to ponder over this corrupted heart, as one runs through a bad book for recreation. But, when this opportunity once failed, all was over with that creature—I now blush for my folly. I became myself again; and I now always entertain for her the aversion which she deserves—more than otherwise, for her atrocious malice toward yourself."

"My friend, in this there is a lesson, a dreadful punishment. That woman might have been dangerous to you—even to you, had she remained faithful to the odious principles, which have always guided her; but she was, for the first time, impressed with shame for her past life; she tried to stammer forth a noble language—a language which was perhaps sincere, but which in her mouth lost all its virtue. Alas! unhappy woman! how she would suffer, could she understand the frightful severity of this lesson."

"Are you going to pity her?" said M. de Rochegune to me in a tone of reproach.

"Pity her? No! But I have suffered so much, that I cannot think of those who suffer without emotion."

"I am moved to pity less easily than you are, Matilda. If that woman suffers, her chastisement is well deserved; I would do nothing to aggravate it, but, upon my soul, I would do nothing to soften it. Twice since has she written to ask a new interview. I have uniformly refused. Now she tries to make opportunities by stationing herself in my street. I cannot hinder her from doing so. But let us change the subject, I beg of you. The memory of these sins still make me sad, and dark thoughts come to the unhappy, they say, as gold comes to the rich," added he, with a deep sigh.

"Are you then always unhappy, my friend?"

"Do you ask me? do you know what sort of a life I lead? Do you know what I suffer—what I endure? But let us forget, let us forget the past; it is dead, dead with the Matilda of other days. The longer I live, the juster do I find that fatal comparison. Oh! yes, I am very wretched. At this hour, nothing binds me to life. My days creep away in despairing monotony. But why should we speak of that? Let us speak of the subject which brought me here." After a few moments silence, M. de Rochegune resumed:

"What I have to say to you, Matilda, is serious, very serious; I have always hesitated to speak to you about it—and I do even now—but to you alone can I confide this secret—a secret which, I fear is not wholly mine."

In hearing these words, I feared lest I should betray myself, since, for many days past, I had anticipated this confidence. The better to ward off the suspicions of M. de Rochegune, I interrupted him, saying. "I must also speak to you on a subject, serious enough, in which I am almost directly interested—for it refers to our best friend."

He made a gesture of surprise, and said: "How is this? Explain yourself, Matilda."

"Oh! Heavens!" answered I, with as great an air of indifference as I could assume, "it refers to this: yesterday M. de Lancry told me, that a natural son of a certain northern sovereign, was about to arrive in Paris: he is very handsome and very rich: he has, they say, the best character and the most charming manners in the world. He will, as a matter of course, be presented to Madame de Richeville,—and, if he happens to be pleased with Emma, and he is worthy of the treasure, it seems to me, that this will be an excellent opportunity to marry this dear child. Don't you think so?" I confess that I invented this falsehood, with an assurance that astonished me. M. de Rochegune appeared struck with what I had said, and answered with some embarrassment: "Do you not believe that Emma has, up to this period, manifested any preference?"

"As long as I lived with herself and her mother, I remarked nothing of the kind! And did you, at that period?"

"Oh! certainly not—no!" replied he.

There was in his reply a tone of conviction, which was very precious to me.

"And have you not since that time, Matilda, observed anything singular in Emma's behaviour?"

"Nothing—absolutely nothing—my friend. But, you know, that I now, unhappily for me, visit Madame de Richeville much less than I did. Can you have observed in Emma, any preference of this sort?" asked I, with an astonished air.

M. de Rochegune appeared to put a violent constraint upon himself, and said: "After all, I am foolish to have any scruples on the subject. I would not, by reason of false modesty, in any future day, cause unhappiness to our friend."

"In truth, I do not understand you."

"Matilda, since I lost you, I have every day visited the house of Madame de Richeville—often twice in the same day. In my visiting, I found a cruel pleasure in talking of you. The duchess had the kindness to receive me, at hours, when her doors are habitually shut. Emma, who very rarely leaves her mother, joined in our conversations. This poor child regrets your loss, as much as we do. She was always so well accustomed to hear me speak of you, as I have always spoken, that I have nothing to hide from her. Many times have I discovered her looks fixed upon me, with a singular fixedness. It at first appeared to me very strange, but I soon ceased to think about it. Once I entered without being announced. She was alone in the drawing-room with her mother; she screamed feebly, and blushed purple. 'Emma, I have frightened you,' said I to her, smiling. 'No! oh, no!' said she. 'Stop—see how my heart beats—you will perceive that it is not fright!' And, taking my hand with a charming simplicity, she placed it on her side. Her heart did, indeed, beat violently."

"I am well aware of that; her first impulses are always exceedingly ingenuous. But what was there strange in that?"

M. de Rochegune seemed to be very much surprised; he doubtless thought he had put me on the track of discovery.

"Of course, there was nothing strange in that, precisely—though that motion—that sudden blush?"

"You know—she is a child—she might have been afraid!"

"Certainly: she might have been afraid. Nevertheless, this circumstance made me more observant. I watched, and I remarked, for instance, her sudden blushing; from the moment I entered her mother's house, the kind of contemplation with which she continually regarded me. As long as I was the only one who witnessed these singularities, I attached only a relative importance to them: but when I made evening visits to her mother's house, Emma, to my great astonishment, exhibited toward me, and often in the presence of strangers, such very significant preferences, that they embarrassed me. This occurrence, at least, determined me to confide the matter to you. The day before yesterday, as I was about to leave Madame de Richeville's house, I found Emma at the door of the hall, waiting. She said to me with a mysterious air, as she handed me a small portfolio, 'To-day is the anniversary of my birth: see what I have made for you. Don't speak of it to Madame de Richeville: it is my secret.'"

"And what was there in this portfolio?"

"My portrait, painted by herself in water-colours; its resemblance was very striking, though it was done from recollection. Understand, dear Matilda, I do not deceive myself as to those appearances, significant as they appear: it is a piece of childishness: but I owe it to Madame de Richeville, to myself, to Emma, whose admirable qualities I fully appreciate, to put an end to this folly; and it is on this topic, that I desired to consult you."

"I believe, indeed, that there is nothing in it but the foolish excitement of a gay girl; so, my friend, if you will listen to my advice, before this excitement can end in a more reflective and deeper sentiment, you will resign yourself to make a little journey. Perhaps this will oppose your projects, but you are too much of a friend to Madame de Richeville to hesitate: your absence will calm the imagination of our poor Emma. While you are absent, I will seize the occasion to speak to Madame de Richeville of this young stranger; if he is as agreeable as they say, if he is presented to Emma as her future husband, there is every reason to believe she will receive him as such. Then the sentiment, which she has for you, will find its level; for I think that it is nothing more than a very lively friendship, somewhat exaggerated by her fancy. What think you of my advice?"

"It seems to me very reasonable; and, although it will cost me somethi to follow it, I will follow it."

"What have you to regret here?"

"Everything and nothing. Now the least untoward event is painful to me, and then I find a mournful charm, in dwelling in those places where I have loved you. I have a sad pleasure, in talking to my friends about you. I confess, it grieves me to renounce, even for a short time, these last consolations."

"I understand you, my friend—but can you hesitate? Think how impressible Emma is! Reflect on the fatal consequences of an attachment like hers, if it becomes serious! Poor, unhappy child! What will be her lot? But your absence, with perhaps the hopes of an approaching marriage, will suffice to cure her of this passing fancy; and then I will talk to her—she has entire confidence in me. I repeat it, my friend, you must make this sacrifice, however painful it may be—you must depart."

"You are right! the repose, the future happiness of Emma, perhaps depend on my absence. Can I hesitate, when I think of all that I owe to her mother, of all the interest with which this child herself inspires me? Is there a more angelic creature—one more entitled to be happy? What does she not deserve!"

"My friend, she is indeed a real treasure, and it may happen that, before your return, your good wishes will be realized. If all matters can be made agreeable, with regard to her marriage, it can take place in two or three months, at farthest. Then, you will come back, and your friends will try to alleviate that existence, which is so sad and wearisome."

"Is it not, indeed, her own? What is left for me? Where are my ties—what is my future now? Ah, Matilda! relations and friends, dear as they may be, can never replace that sentiment, which was my whole life! The successes, of which I was so proud, now possess no charms for me; you are at the bottom of all my ambition, all my pride." And he added, endeavouring to smile: "In this respect, I am like those poor women, who have the habit of making themselves beautiful and amiable for their lovers. They have nothing beyond that—they ask themselves, of what other use is beauty and dress?"

"Until a new love imparts to them a new desire to be pretty and charming," said I, smiling.

"You know very well," said he, mournfully, "that all true affection is over for me—how can any other bring joy? I am thirty years old, and I have, perhaps, a long life before me, which must be passed away in this dull, and icy indifference. Then questionings—what can I do? what can I guess?—are insupportable to me. I would accept of, I know not what future, provided that it could be certain—provided I could be spared the sterile toil of thinking of the morrow! Sometimes, I envy the mechanical existence of the cloister; that mute and passive obedience, which relieves you of all volition as to what you must do."

"Can you speak thus?—you, who are young and free?"

"And it is just that freedom which frightens me. I vainly seek to rid myself of the apathy which enthralls me. These are useless agitations."

Twenty times was I on the point of saying to M. de Rochegune, "Marry Emma: she loves you: your existence will then have an aim, an end." But I feared to compromise, by too much haste, the success of that labour, which had cost me so many tears, so much care. I said to him, "Perhaps your journey will, of itself, be sufficient to relieve you of this temporary stupor. Rely upon me. I will write to you the result of my observations, touching Emma, and I hope soon to inform you that your absence has had that effect which we hope."

On the morning of the day after I had had this conversation with M. de

Rochegune, Emma wrote me a letter, which resumed, so to speak, our correspondence; which had ceased, while I was living with Madame de Richeville.

EMMA TO MADAME DE LANCRY.

"I have obeyed your counsels, my saviour and guardian-angel. I will now recount to you all that has transpired since my last letter.

"You tell me that very soon he will no longer have any reason to conceal his love from me, and I believe you; I have always been most prone to believe you, so much have you revealed to me! As you have counselled me thus, I have never concealed any of my impressions, I was happy to look upon him; I did look upon him. When his eyes met mine, I did not turn my eyes away, and he could read in them all the joy which his presence afforded me. I do not know if you will approve of such conduct; it is perhaps, somewhat odd—but I presented him with the portrait I had made of him—as a souvenir, you know. Not, however, that I expected to give him any great pleasure by presenting him with his own likeness; but because I deemed that he would discern in that, a token that his image was ever present with me—and, I know not why, but from the moment I had finished the portrait, it seemed to me that it no longer belonged to me, that I had no longer a right to keep it, that I ought to give it up to him. And then I was so proud of my work—if you only knew how much it looked like him—I toiled much at it when you did not see me—no resemblance could be more striking. After the picture was once begun, any time that I wished to see him, I had only to shut my eyes and he appeared to me:—yes, it was a real apparition.

"M. de Rochegune is always very sad when he speaks of you—he is like Madame de Richeville and myself; we cannot console ourselves for your departure so accustomed were we to the sweet habit of seeing you every day. I can easily discern that he loves me: he treats me no longer as a little girl. The day before yesterday, when I gave him the portrait, he looked upon me with an emotion which brought the tears to my eyes. Oh! when I reflect that for six weeks I was in such an agony! You had disclosed to me how great was the woe, of which I was ready to die—and it was yourself that cured me! I often cast myself on my knees to bless you, to pray to you as to a saint. By one word, you saved me, and that word was *his* name.

"There is one question, which I constantly ask myself. How have I deserved that he should love me—how could he choose me from all those among whom his choice is free? Does it not seem to you a most happy, and at the same time, a most unhoped-for good fortune for your Emma? I should like to know, if I loved him before he loved me. Oh, yes! I loved him first—had it been otherwise, it would have been ingratitude in me.

"Do not chide me, nor think me importunate; but do you imagine that he will be obliged to keep silent much longer? When will he tell me that he loves me? You told me in your last letter, that it might be very soon. But periods of time may be different to you and to me.

"Come, my good guardian-angel, I will be patient; I will put no more indiscreet questions. Besides, now that I have let him see that I love him, it will be selfishness in me to be impatient. Adieu! adieu! You perceive that I scrupulously follow your advice. Come and see us; you know that you are always most beloved by Madame de Richeville, by *him*, and by your EMMA."

CHAPTER XXV.

AFFAIRS OF THE HEART.

M. DE ROCHEGUNE had written a line to Madame de Richeville to advise her of his absence, occasioned, as he said, by affairs of importance.

On the morning of his departure, I informed Emma that she must make up her mind not to see M. de Rochegune, perhaps for a long time; since the family reasons which had made him so long defer the offer of his hand, had become more serious. I at last informed the poor child, that M. de Rochegune was so unhappy at leaving her, that he could not come to bid her adieu. As I anticipated, Emma was most sadly grieved at this unforseen blow, which had come so suddenly to break down her hopes, or at least to put them off for an indefinite period; but it was my duty to risk much to assure her happiness. Without being as alarming as they had formerly been, several of the symptoms of Emma's old malady developed themselves afresh. She subsided into a dull and heavy grief. Her sorrow, of the cause of which she was now conscious, underwent a reaction of a milder, but a deeper character. I had been obliged to admit Doctor Gerard to my confidence, for I was anxious lest I should too dangerously compromise Emma's health. He approved of my design, kept my secret from Madame de Richeville, and gave her promise of a change in the malady of her daughter.

I had often written to M. de Rochegune, to keep him informed of the progress of events. I did not conceal from him that the situation of Emma gave me more and more uneasiness. At length, M. Gerard, having informed me that there would be danger in prolonging the anguish of the young lady, I implored him to return; his presence alone being capable of producing a salutary change. He answered me in these words:

"I will be in Paris to-morrow night. What you have communicated is truly deplorable. I am, unhappily, incapacitated from repairing the evil which I have caused. Emma is an angel of goodness, of beauty, of candour and of grace. She deserves a heart which belongs to her alone. If I had never in my life met you, it might yet be possible for me to love her;—her love would have been my dearest possession. *But to marry her through pity!* is it worthy of her? is it worthy of me? All my hope is, that you have deceived yourself as to the danger which she incurs. In any event, I shall come. And her mother! my best friend! I know not what fatality pursues me. R."

Some hours after M. de Rochegune's return, M. Gerard, whose skill and character he highly honoured, called at his house, and, as I requested, informed him of the truly alarming condition of his fair patient. To make M. de Rochegune comprehend the full seriousness of the crisis, M. Gerard had only to make him acquainted with the reasons which he had deduced from the first sickness of Emma;—the same cause had again produced the same effects.

"Well," said he to me, with a mournful accent, "I have just left M. Gerard. This poor child's life is in danger?"

"Alas! yes! I entreated the doctor, whose sincerity you know, to go and tell you how it was, not doubting that his words would be more eloquent than all arguments."

"What he has told me is most distressing. Unhappily, I can only deplore its existence. I repeat to you, my dear Matilda, I know of no one better or more attractive than Emma. You know me well enough to believe that her birth would be no obstacle. I render due justice to her excellent qualities, but I love her not! I can never love her!"

"Doubtless, my friend, that is to be deplored; but all hope is not yet absolutely lost. I have only thus far caused you to contemplate, in a vague manner, the possibility of a marriage, in case of its becoming the only chance of safety for Emma. This may happen to-morrow—and then I think this marriage will become a duty."

"A duty!"

"Yes! for you, whose soul is generous and great."

"It would be a duty, neither for me nor for any one else, Matilda," said he to me, with a firmness which frightened me. "I lament for what has occurred, but I can do nothing."

"You can do nothing, when a word——"

"To speak that word, I must love."

"But she loves you! she is dying! Can that consideration avail nothing."

"And what have I done to awaken or encourage that love? Is it my fault that the imagination of this unhappy child is excited beyond reason?"

"Is it *her* fault, if, by seeing you every day, and listening to your praises, love has, by degrees, been developed in her heart? Is there not cruelty in affecting an indifference which you do not feel? No! no! for the love of Emma ought to make you proud!"

"I should be proud of it—yes—I should be proud of it were I worthy of it."

"Why are you unworthy?"

"Because I do not reciprocate that love—because I never can!"

"You do not reciprocate it now, it is true—but who will answer for the future? Think of what you told me, previous to your departure, when you spoke to me of the disgust which you suffered? This sad mood of mind cannot but be increased: your love for me can avail nothing more during this life; and, as for myself, why should I hide the truth from you? every day rivets the bonds which attach me to M. de Lancry; as much as he can, he repairs past wrongs; thus, you see, my friend, that our dreams in former days have ended as dreams always do. Thus, while you say that you will ever preserve for me that melancholy remembrance, which even survives the departed, I will always entertain for you the most affectionate regard, the deepest esteem; but now our two lives must run in different currents, and every day will separate us more. What a future is there reserved for you!"

"The future is most sad! you know it."

"And it is such a future that you hesitate to engage—to sacrifice, if you will—when that sacrifice involves the life of Emma."

"It is better for her to die than to be bound to a withered heart."

"But who can say, that the generous warmth of this young heart will not revivify the soul that you have deemed for ever torpid?"

"It is impossible! Matilda, I am sure of it! I should never love ——"

"Then!" exclaimed I, with bitterness, "then, Emma must die! it is so destined. After all, what is lost but the existence of a creature of God? Emma, it is true, combines in herself the most charming and rarest qualities. She is but sixteen; she is amiable, lovely; she wishes to die;—she will die; and he who, by his disdainful indifference, will cause her death, will doubtless sacrifice this young girl to the impulse of some heroical ambition—some grand passion, or, at least, to the attraction of some life of adventure, which may arouse him from his lethargy. No! no, it is to *ennui*—to a dull and cowardly apathy, that he will sacrifice this adorable being—the daughter of his best friend!"

"You are warm, Matilda."

"Did M. de Mortagne still live, would he not use the same language? I appeal to your integrity: what would he counsel you to do?"

M. de Rochegune made no reply, and looked down with a mournful expression; but he seemed struck by my words.

"His advice was sacred to you—you would not have doubted. Ah! my friend! call to mind what you said to me one day, when the instincts of your heart revealed to you that our love would manifest some glorious example of devotion. You foresaw, probably, what would happen, at this hour. My friend, be generous! be not unmerciful!"

"Matilda, say frankly, would M. de Mortagne have thus advised me? Do you, yourself, advise me to marry Emma out of pity? At this price, she will refuse my hand."

"Can it indeed be you who ask me such a question? And, supposing you were to yield to pity, would you ever suffer Emma to know the truth? No! no! I know your heart! Rather than wound her, you would deceive her by a touching falsehood—she is so proud. You are right—she would die a thousand times, rather than owe this union to your pity."

"But it is madness. Does she not know how I love you—how much I regret you? Has she not, always, heard me speak of you in the most tender language?"

"You know the rectitude and candour of her soul. She has seen, in our love, but the attachment of brother and sister. Was I not married? Was not this word an insurmountable barrier between us?"

"And you would, with pleasure, see me marry Emma?"

"I should be happy in this marriage, because it would give back life to Emma?—because it offers to you numberless chances of happiness—because it will confer unhoped-for happiness on my best friend. I should rejoice in this marriage, because it would tear you away from that apathy, which you have not the strength to overcome: because you will, by degrees, recuperate under the vivyfying influence of this pure love; because you will find a thousand charms in domestic bliss. Your life will have new objects; new ties may, perhaps, bind you to it still more closely. In the hope of keeping alive the illustrious name which you have inherited from your father, a noble, a generous ambition will be born in your mind—and then," added I, without the power of restraining my tears, "my friend, you believe that you are unhappy—you must compel yourself to forget your dearest hopes; for, when we are, at last, compelled to relinquish all that might have rendered us happy on earth—what is left to us, but the sweet consolation of making others as happy as we, ourselves, might have been? Behold this poor, young girl! so transported by a dream of lofty delight—of a happiness so unreasonable—that she is dying! dying, for having only dared to indulge in this blissful dream! and you, by a word, can restore her to life— you can realize her dream. Tell me, my friend, who, excepting God, could perform a more powerful deed—could confer so magnificent a boon? Is it not like sharing the Divine Essence, to create such perfect rapture? Is it not to attain the highest enjoyment of which man is capable? Oh! how stupid a monster was he who said, that revenge is the pastime of the gods."

"Matilda, leave me!" said M. de Rochegune, visibly affected; "these transports are dangerous—we yield to them, only at the expense of reason."

"Of reason! And does not the most austere reason accord with the voice of your heart, if you will but listen to it? My friend, you are moved—I see it. Ah! be generous: let not our sad loves be succeeded by the eternal remorse of having caused the death of Emma. Let not mine be the fearful regret of having destroyed the beauty of your soul, by the sorrows I have caused you. Oh! no, no! far from that, let us show that our affection has but rendered us better. For that I will forgive all that it has made me suffer; and you will make this unhappy child forget all she has suffered for you."

"But I should be insane, I should be guilty, to allow myself to be carried away by the emotion which your language occasions; and you will, one day, Matilda, repent the ills which my weakness will have brought upon me."

"No, no, my friend; yield, oh! yield to this noble impulse of your heart; and one day, holding in your hand the hand of Emma—one day—a smile on your lips, serenity on your brow, and joy in your heart—you will say to me: 'Matilda, your language was that of a kind and sincere friend: thanks to you, I am very happy. And then, to myself," I added, not being able to conceal my tears, and to suppress a painful emotion, "to myself—"

"What is the matter, Matilda?" exclaimed M. de Rochegune, regarding me with anxiety. I understood all the danger of my involuntary tenderness; one suspicion of M. de Rochegune would have lost all.

"Nothing, my friend," said I, endeavouring to smile; "I was moved in thinking of the felicity which you would enjoy with Emma. Hearken to my wishes and to my advice. Bye-and-by, as I told you—when I am also happy—enjoying like you all the charms of domestic life, I will whisper to you—Naughty friend! I was obliged to force you to do this!"

"Ah! Matilda, be cautious for Emma, more than for myself. After all, I have nothing now to risk. My existence cannot be more desolate than it is—but this child, good Heavens! some day or other, how will she be undeceived!"

"But this child loves you without hope—loves you even unto death! Her life can never become more desolate than it now is."

"Ah, Matilda, they will be sad nuptials."

"To Emma they will be those of a queen. Your promise, my friend, your promise!"

"Matilda!"

"In the name of your father—in the name of the friend whom we have lost, and who would have joined his prayers to mine!"

"Do you wish it?"

"I implore it."

"Let the fate of the child then be accomplished!"

"Oh, bless you for the best, the most generous of men! Ah! you know not, you know not how surpassingly sweet are the tears which you now cause me to shed;" I exclaimed.

By so many mournful sacrifices was thy happiness, oh! my Emma, secured.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE PROPOSAL.

What can I say more? The promise of M. de Rochegune was sacred. With his usual delicacy, he comprehended the necessity of letting Emma believe that he had long loved her. I took it upon myself to make his proposals to Madame de Richeville. I hurried to see her—but, before opening the subject, had an interview with Emma. I forbear to express her surprise, her joy, her intoxication, when I informed her both of the return of M. de Rochegune and the proposal of marriage which I had come to communicate to Madame de Richeville. The dear child promised me to appear very much astonished when the duchess told her the good news. My little deception would not then be discovered, either by her or by M. de Rochegune.

I went to Madame de Richeville.

"I have come to see Emma; she is very much better," I remarked. Madame de Richeville sadly shook her head.

"I have heard," said she, "that Emma conceals from me some secret sorrow. M. Gerard seeks in vain for the cause of her languishing illness. It must be that the unhappy child nourishes some deep and hidden sorrow, which is killing her. In vain I question her. Often am I disturbed with the thought that she knows the mystery of her birth; and yet, nothing convinces me that my fears are well grounded on this subject."

"Has not the doctor told you that Emma was affected with a nervous malady? You know that the cause of these affections is often as inexplicable as the rapidity of their course."

"Alas! nothing is likewise more rapid than their relapses. Only fifteen days ago, Emma was perfectly well; and now, what uneasiness does she not cause me?"

"All your friends have partaken of your anxiety—all rejoice in the hope that you ought to entertain. Among these, I need not mention to you M. de Rochegune. I saw him this morning."

"Has he arrived?"

"Yes, he has confided to me a very important resolution. It was to reflect upon this more deliberately that he went and passed some days in solitude. His life, as you ought to know, is now quite unsettled."

"Ah! Matilda, you ought not to be reproached; you have but obeyed the imperious voice of duty. M. de Rochegune is indeed quite unhappy."

"He has been very much so—but now it is otherwise. You know him—know the firmness of his character—he will not expend his strength upon the impossible: he has the courage to look upon the future as he ought. He now feels for me nothing more than a calm attachment, for his love could not resist the rude shock to which I subjected it; he has often said so to you himself."

"Yes—I will not conceal it from you, Matilda. He has often said to me, with despair, that your return to your husband had slain his affection. That the Matilda of other days, was like one dead to him."

"My friend, M. de Rochegune rarely utters such vain words. In that, as in all other circumstances, he is serene. He is completely alienated from me. The proof of that—I am going to surprise you—is his desire to be married."

"He? to marry? it is impossible!"

"The only object of his absence, as I told you, was to obtain leisure to reflect on this serious determination. He will shortly arrive at middle age. He is isolated; the future disturbs him—appears to him as gloomy as a desert. He no longer loves me: as he told you, that sentiment is dead within him, and he does not falsify. From the very reason that I once occupied a large space in his existence, and that I do so no longer, he feels the want of creating durable ties; and he would seek for happiness, in the pure affections of a family."

"For him!—him to marry!" repeated Madame de Richeville, with surprise: "and it is to you—to you that he has imparted this confidence?"

"I am ever his friend: ought he not to inform me of so important a project?"

"Doubtless, Matilda: but to consult you on such a matter—you, whom he loved so dearly, seems almost cruel!"

"I discern in this confidence, not cruelty but affection. As for him, I have coolly contemplated his position. What can he do henceforth? Do you not deem it natural that he should turn his thoughts to the future? Will not the woman of his choice be very happy? You are familiar with the goodness of his heart, the nobleness of his character; and, if he wishes to marry, those good qualities will insure the felicity of his wife."

"Oh! I do not doubt it! All ties, all duties, are sacred to him."

"Why, then, are you surprised at his desire to marry?"

"Ah! Matilda! there is no woman worthy of him!"

"I do not altogether coincide with you, my friend; but I believe that M. de Rochegune, on account of these rare qualities, will find it as difficult to marry, as—as Emma, for instance."

"Ah! Matilda; I could wish that my thoughts were not, as they are, preoccupied with that subject."

"Comfort yourself with the assurance, that you will not long be troubled with the care of finding a husband for her."

"Alas! you know all my fears about it."

"You will take me for an insane person; but I will say of her, what you have just said of M. de Rochegune—there is no man worthy of her—I mean there is but one—and that is M. de Rochegune."

"Who?"

"M. de Rochegune."

"M. de Rochegune?"

"Certainly."

"M. de Rochegune! M. de Rochegune! Indeed, my poor Matilda, you are crazy!"

"Not so crazy, perhaps."

"M. de Rochegune!"

"Yes! what is there so astonishing about it? Do you think him a man to disquiet himself concerning the birth of Emma? Do you believe him capable of thinking of her fortune?"

"No! but never can he think—never has he thought of Emma!"

"But suppose that he does think of her?"

"He! it is impossible!"

"Suppose it was so—would you not be happy—very happy?"

"What a question! But of what use are these dreams?"

"But if they are not dreams?"

"How?"

"And if M. de Rochegune, impressed with all her adorable qualities, which he has for a long time appreciated, is captivated with her; not, perhaps, with a violent, rapturous passion; but with a serious, earnest love, which only needs marriage to ripen into passion. If M. de Rochegune should ask her hand of you, would you give it to him?"

"Matilda! Matilda! this is the first time you have caused me a sentiment of sorrow. Emma would not give me the uneasiness that she now does—but this mournful pleasantry——"

"By the memory of my mother, my friend, what I tell you, is true! M. de Rochegune has entreated me to ask of you the hand of Emma; and, if she consents, he asks that the marriage may take place as soon as possible."

These words were uttered under an invocation so sacred to me, that Madame de Richeville was forced to believe me. I will not attempt to paint her joy, her astonishment, redoubled as it was, by the rapture of Emma, who, to the last, faithfully preserved my secret.

All was accomplished. I will confess, that so long as I had a single doubt as to the happy issue of my plans—my fears, my uncertainties, my anguish, sufficed to distract my mind; but, having arrived at the house, having made the proposal, I was, for a moment, in the depths of despair. My effort was over: Emma would be happy. M. de Rochegune would be happy—but I!—I! I will tell all. So long as M. de Rochegune looked upon his marriage with Emma, as a sort of sacrifice—so long as I saw that he was, in spite of himself, under the influence of my remembrance, I felt a kind of melancholy satisfaction; my devotion cost me less. But when, by degrees, he yielded to the irresistible charm of that child—when he saw himself, so to speak, born again and revivified under her smile—when he discovered the treasures of her angelic soul—when he said to me, with a blush, that there was but one woman in the world capable of consoling him for my loss, and that, that woman was Emma—when he said to me, that the happiness for which he was indebted to me, would make him one day forget the griefs I had occasioned—then, I confess, that I had many bitter—nay, most wretched thoughts. I was ashamed of them. I knew their unworthiness, but I could not escape from them.

Very soon, this marriage was the talk of all Paris. Some saw in it a proof of vexation or inconstancy on the part of M. de Rochegune; others, a bold stroke of Madame de Richeville, who had arrived at her object by finesse and management. Many, at last, affirmed that M. de Rochegune, possessed with a rage for notoriety, had considered nothing in this union but its originality; for it was not supposable, that any man with a rent-roll of one hundred thousand crowns, would bestow it upon a poor orphan-girl, without some sort of hidden design. The marriage was to take place at Rochegune, as soon as the formalities would permit.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A MARRIAGE.

I HAVE not spoken of my inner life during this period. The fatal communications of M. Lugarto had entirely ceased. I had grown familiar with my first fears. Blondeau slept in my chamber. As I ate very little, and as I always apprehended some treachery, she herself prepared my repasts, with the utmost precaution. I made them close in a solid manner the wainscot, which might serve as a lurking-place. Doubtless, my heroical resolution may create a smile. I bought a very sharp poniard, which was always placed near my bed. For some time after the receipt of the letter from M. Lugarto, I had horrible dreams; but, by degrees, they vanished. I habituated myself to a position, which had at first seemed frightful and nearly intolerable. I rarely saw M. de Lancry. He had lost all hope of finding Ursula again, in spite of the submission with which he had obeyed her orders, with regard to myself. If I had insisted upon my husband's consenting to a separation, he would not, perhaps, have refused; but, for a thousand reasons that can be understood, I was not only obliged to remain for a time longer in that position, but to seem to embrace it with joy. My life was very monotonous. I saw Madame de Richeville and Emma, nearly every day. I received no one at my house. In the day, I designed, I embroidered; then I went to walk in the park of Monceaux, or to visit the good Prince d'Hericourt and his wife, who had proved their friendship for me, and always kindly chided me for my foolish love, and falsely-bestowed devotion. I awaited, with impatience, the marriage of M. de Rochegune. Then I counted upon retiring to Maran, which Madame de Richeville had bought in her name. I had also confided to her keeping the diamonds which were left to me by my mother. I deemed them worth a hundred thousand crowns. My husband had always tried to make me give them up to him. I had always resisted, resolving to make them some day the price of our legal separation. If he acceded, as I believed he would, it would be then very easy for me to say, and make people believe, that M. de Lancry was tired of the life which we led, and that I had been once more the dupe of my devotion. People would probably not interest themselves in the fate of a victim, so stupid as I; but I would console myself, by severing, at last my horrible chain. One fact, insignificant enough in itself, made me take a resolution, which subsequently led to fatal consequences. For a considerable period, nothing had caused me to suspect the fatal influence of M. Lugarto; when, one day, I thought I perceived some disorder in the arrangement of a large number of letters, which I had locked up in a tortoise-shell casket, the key of which I always carried about. Not one letter was missing, but it seemed to me that the casket had been opened in my absence. I could not for an instant, doubt the fidelity of Blondeau; and, although I had no reason to suspect my other domestic—nevertheless, reflecting upon the power of the gold of M. Lugarto, and his resources of corruption, I resolved to keep about me all papers of importance. In this number, there was my correspondence with Emma—a correspondence which showed the part I had taken in the marriage, as well as many letters from M. de Rochegune, in which he spoke to me of Emma's illness; of his sorrow, that he was only able to deplore it, since he could not espouse her, except from pity, &c. &c. It was not possible for me to confide these letters to M. de Rochegune, or to Madame de Richeville; for a chance might reveal to them, what I had so much interest in concealing; they both were, however, as much as I, objects of M. Lugarto's hatred; and the papers were not, in this view, in more safety with them than with me. I did not know with whom to intrust them, when I thought of M. de Senneville. I had seen him often at his aunt's house; he had been represented to me as a man of honour, safe and secret. I prayed him to keep this deposit for me. It was agreed with him, that whenever I should have any papers to add to those which I had sent, Blondeau would go to his house and deposit them in the casket, the key of which she had. M. de Senneville offered with the best possible grace, to render me this small service. I so much feared the *espionage* of M. Lugarto, and the terrible use he would make of that correspondence, if he had known where to seize upon it, that I begged M. de Senneville to come to my house once in the evening, so that he could bring the casket without being discovered. M. de Senneville had the tact, not to allude to the attentions which he had formerly paid me. He saw that it would be in very bad taste, to renew his pretensions in consequence of the obligation which I had thus incurred.

I received a letter from M. de Rochegune a few days after his departure to his estate, where his marriage was solemnized.

ROCHEGUNE, 20th October, 1836.

"Emma is my wife: to you, noble and sincere friend, must I render thanks for my good fortune. It is your work; your prophecies are realized; I now walk, in life, with a footstep free and sure. The horizon grows clear before me; from day to day, it becomes more pure. Your counsel has bound me at once to existence by sacred ties. To have bonds like these, is to have duties; and the accomplishment of a duty has always been, to me, a serious pleasure. I write to you, because my marriage ought to be regarded as an event in your life: the farther I leave behind me the time when you overthrew all my hopes, the more does reason resume its empire over me—the more is my spirit freed from the base contemplations which obscured it—the more do I congratulate myself for having followed your advice. You it was, whom I loved more than all others in the world—you it is, and you it will be, whom I shall, henceforth, most religiously esteem. To you, I owe a happiness of which I have never before conceived—the happiness of *living in another;* or, rather, of causing another to live, because I live only for her.

"I feel for Emma a purely disinterested affection: she is so identified, so assimilated with me—I am conscious of exercising so direct—not to say vital—an influence over her, that I am at the same time, happy, proud, and restless, in the part I have to perform. Nothing can be more affecting, more charming, than the simple ecstacy with which she sometimes contemplates the life that I have created for her. You were right, Matilda; her happiness has rendered me happy; her love has made me almost a lover. Why should I conceal it from you? I no longer feel the love which I felt for you;—it has been destroyed, entirely, at one blow;—it has expired, without decay, and without agony;—it has been blasted, in its grandeur and its strength. I have often said to you, that the dead do not awake in their graves; if, by a miracle, they leave the sepulchre, they are such as they were when they descended into its cold gloom. Thus it is with my love for you—should it miraculously revive, it will live again only as it was when the arrow pierced its heart. No, no—thanks be to Heaven! happily for myself, for you, and for Emma, the sentiment with which she animates me is not made of the ruins of yours and mine; it is a young and virgin sentiment, which she, alone, would have made me experience—for her love does not resemble that of any other woman, and it is only a love like hers that can produce a similar love. I cannot advance a step in the generous path in which you persuaded me to walk, without saying to you, 'Matilda, you were right;' without recalling those noble, and saint-like words—'When we were forced to renounce that which constituted our felicity on earth; what is left to us, but to console ourselves by rendering others as happy as we, ourselves, desired to be?'

"I am sometimes, even as you told me, tempted to believe myself a little deity, when I contemplate the delight of those around me. I cannot paint to you the deep joy of the good duchess. She can hardly yet believe in this marriage. She sometimes gazes upon me with eyes suffused with tears, and says—'Is it indeed, true? Is it not a dream? have you transported my child into your paradise?' And then, sometimes, in spite of me, she becomes sad; and exclaims with dread—'This happiness is too perfect;—what misfortune threatens us?' I comfort her as well as I can; but she is superstitious, as all persons are who have suffered great sorrows. Had it not been for you, and your admonitions, that won me from the dull apathy in which I was buried, I, myself, should have become a fatalist.

"We have been considering whether it would be opportune to reveal to Emma the secret of her birth: I think not—her delicacy and sensibility are such, that I fear lest such a revelation would prove to her a source of continual sorrow, by occasioning a grievous contest, between those principles which would make her accuse her mother, and the tenderness which would suggest a defence. If fate wills that she shall, by-and-bye, learn the secret, it will be a great calamity, I am sure; but why should we anticipate it?

"We shall remain at Rochegune until the month of February or March. Emma desires it. I cannot express to you our regrets, in thinking that we shall not see one another. You know, alas! by whom the obstacles are made. I console myself by trusting that you are happy. I know you: poverty would be to you an affair of little moment, and you would even be capable of finding charms in it, if you had not to attribute it to your husband's misconduct.

"Now that I am writing, I ought to tell you, that when I pronounced the word which united me for ever to Emma, I felt a sensation of poignant grief. This marriage was a final step, by which I should be irrevocably separated from you. Until then, though I had cherished no hope whatsoever—though you did not belong to yourself, much less to me, I had remained free. This sorrowful emotion was soon effaced; I became happy in the present. I do not say that I regret not, that I shall not always regret the past; but I have most precious hopes for the future. I should be suspicious of my love for Emma, were it more ardent than it now is. Such as it is, it is sufficient for the joy—the delight of that adorable child; and it must, necessarily, increase always.

"That which impresses me most in Emma, is a sense of justice and rectitude; a moral elevation, by which I am much reminded of the salient points of your own character. And besides—with a child-like imitation, which has its source in her attachment to you—she has assumed many of your habits, your manner of dressing your hair, and even certain inflections of your voice.

"Farewell! most tenderly farewell! It seems to me, now that our positions are equalized, and that the sweet and calm affection which I felt for you of old, has revived again—it is perhaps even calmer than it was, for I used vaguely to apprehend the tumults of an impassioned love for you—now these flickering fires have sunk into cinders, which can never be reillumined.

"Farewell! and thanks once more, Matilda! had it not been for you, I should not only have caused the death of that dear one whom I now so tenderly love, but I should have passed a wretched, barren, and it might have been, degraded existence; for I never think without a shudder, that there was a time when I regretted not to discover in your detestable cousin her habitual coldness and insolence. Had she appeared to me as I wished—led astray by despair which would have forced me to yield to her fatal fascinations, I might, perhaps, have been linked to that lost soul! I might perhaps have employed for evil purposes the energy and the faculties, which God has endowed me with for nobler ends.

"You know, that the farther removed we are from danger, the more able are we to contemplate it with coolness, the more easily can we judge of its extent. Well, I confess to you that my danger was imminent, very imminent; and that I was preserved from it only by the absurd preoccupation of that woman, which hindered her from discovering in the impatience with which I listened to her virtuous homilies, my desire to hear her speak another language. Matilda, there is nothing more to be dreaded, nothing less easily to be subdued, than the deviations of a man from good, when he has a right to disown and despise that which he thinks he has formerly reverenced. I recoil from the consideration of what would have been the result of the approximation of Ursula's character to mine; under the circumstances, if I had been ever subjected to the influence of the fiendish genius of that woman, I know not to what lengths we might have proceeded. How far am I from my angel-wife! Poor darling! she could never believe that there could be an Ursula; but when we are resting securely in a safe haven, we love to look back upon the tempests we have braved. I love to call to mind the ominous clouds with which my future might have been darkened, because it now lives before me, like a summer landscape, smiling and at peace: I love to summon before me the fatal lineaments of Ursula, as I cradle upon my heart my pure and sinless bride."

I was at this passage of M. de Rochegune's letter, when I heard a loud noise in the anteroom of my sleeping apartment, and suddenly M. Secherin, pale and agitated, stood before me.

"In the name of heaven! come! come!" he cried, "she is dying! she wishes to see you!"

"Who? who is dying?" said I, greatly alarmed, hoping that it could not be Ursula, in spite of the wrongs she had done me.

"I tell you that Ursula is dying! dying; and I am not there! But come now; by every minute of delay, I lose a minute of her life."

"Ursula! Ursula!" I exclaimed, clasping my hands in stupor and affright.

"Ah! you are merciless! As for me, I come at her entreaty; you must come also—you! I tell you she is dying! that her minutes are numbered, and I am not there!" repeated the wretched man, endeavouring to draw me along with him.

I hastily put on my hat and shawl, and followed him mechanically. A hackney-coach was in waiting; we got in, and it rapidly drove off.

M. Secherin—pale and wasted, his eyes blood-shot, his features contracted by spasms of anguish and despair—hardly seemed to be conscious of my presence; he spoke some disconnected words, and thought of nothing except of urging the coachman to drive faster by all kinds of promises.

"But when did you learn this fatal news?" said I; "is her situation, indeed, utterly remediless? Is there no hope?"

He stared steadily at me: "Hope! with the dose of poison she has taken —hope!" cried he, with a burst of convulsive laughter.

"Has she poisoned herself? Ursula poisoned herself!"

Without replying, he seized my hand violently, and said in a hollow voice —"And I cannot kill your husband but once!"

"Think not of vengeance! think how to save the unfortunate creature— if, haply, there is yet time. And your mother?"

"My mother!" cried he, "my mother is here! My God! we shall not arrive in time—Ursula will be dead—you will see that she will be dead!"

"But how did you learn this fatal news?"

"By a letter—only a few lines from her! If I wished to see her for the last time, she wrote me, I must hasten to Paris. My mother—unrelenting as she always is—oh! this coachman! how he creeps along—she will be dead!"

"Well! your mother," said I, endeavouring to distract his mind from its anguish.

"Oh! my mother," he replied in a quick, husky voice, in a kind of fearful half-delirium—"my mother said directly, 'It is a farce she is playing to obtain her pardon—a farce!' The letter smelt of death! I was not deceived. I hurried from Rouvrai—mother has followed me—A farce! you will see—you will see—if you can recognize her dying face. And then, the last wishes of the dying—they are sacred—sacred. Ah! we draw near. If she is only alive now—to pardon my severity—no, not my severity, my weakness—for it was weakness that made me yield to my mother's hatred of her. And see what has happened—see what has happened! The poor creature was guilty of a single fault: instead of being indulgent—instead of being kind—instead of bringing her back to goodness, by generosity—she was driven away, with infamy! she was cursed! Then, how could it be otherwise? She was confirmed in evil—she was lost altogether. And then at last—for she always had a good heart—at last, remorse overtakes her— she attemps her own life—she poisons herself—and then it is said—'Bah! farce! farce!' See what my mother's hatred has done! See what I have done by my weakness!"

"But the physicians—what do they think?"

"The physicians!" added he, with that convulsive smile, and that agonized expression which frightened me—"the physicians do not say as my mother did—It is a farce! They have said she is a dead woman! And then I cried out to my mother—'Well! you are contented now! Do you hear? —She is a dead woman!' Ah! we have arrived at last—here is the place?"

The carriage stopped. M. Secherin rapidly descended; I followed him in haste.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

DEATH.

After traversing a little uncultivated garden, full of weeds, brambles and stones, we came first to a sort of antechamber, and then to a large room— dark, damp, solemn, and furnished with a parsimony which betokened distress.

There lay Ursula—dying!

An old woman, of a repulsive aspect, and clothed in tatters, acted as sick-nurse. My cousin, as soon as she saw me, made a sign to her to leave the room.

How mournful a spectacle!

There lay Ursula, in a robe of black, extended upon a sofa; a large shawl covered her feet and knees. She seemed to shiver with cold. With one hand she convulsively clutched the cushion, which supported her heavy head; with her other hand, she pushed away from her pale and icy brow, the scattered tresses of her beautiful brown hair. Her face, frightfully thin, was livid; her great blue eyes were nearly rayless.

When she saw me, her looks brightened a little, a mournful smile flickered over her discoloured lips; she clasped her hands with an expression of deep gratitude.

"Matilda!" she said, in a feeble voice. "You are most generous; I expected this. I would be alone with you, for a few moments."

"Again! again!" cried her husband, who had flung himself on his knees beside her, and was sobbing violently—"I will never leave you again, now!"

Ursula turned upon him a beseeching glance.

"Ah! her smile! her sweet and beautiful smile!" cried M. Secherin, looking upon his wife, with heart-breaking sorrow—"look, though she is dying, yet I know that smile; it is the same with which she used to greet me, in the old, blessed days—I have found her again—and she is dying—dying!"

"I pray you, my love, leave me for a few minutes, alone with Matilda—my last moments shall be yours, that I may ask pardon of you, as I do of her, for the evil I have done you—as him——"

"My cousin, I implore you," said I.

"I have not time to ask many more favours of you," said Ursula, trying to smile upon her husband; "I pray you, do not refuse me this."

He rose quickly and went out, hiding his face in his hands.

"Matilda," said Ursula, as, with a painful effort, she handed me a key, "in the secretary, in my chamber, you will find a package of papers, of letters—I desire them all to be burned. Their discovery would render still more wretched the excellent man whom I have so unworthily afflicted. The effect of the poison was too rapid; I could not accomplish this task myself, before the arrival of my husband."

"Your wishes shall be executed," said I, turning away my head, so that she might not see my tears.

"Matilda," said she, after a moment's silence, "I die for M. de Rochegune—I can tell you that without wounding your feelings, since you do not love him."

"Great God! in this terrible moment, have other thoughts," cried I: "do you not know that he is married?"

"It was for that reason that I no longer wished to live. Although he had always despised me, although he had refused to see me again after the two last interviews which I had with him—still a vague hope sustained me. Fool that I was! But, when I learned that he was married to an angel whom he loved, I was convinced of what I ought to have known sooner—that, for me, there was nothing left but to die?"

"Ah! Ursula! you have done a wrong, both to yourself and others."

"Yes! but then, I suffered so much! Oh! if you only knew, when he came to the two meetings I had appointed, to speak about yourself—with what disdain, with what aversion, he, at first, overwhelmed me! To elevate myself a little in his eyes, by disclosing the influence which he already exercised over my heart, all the high thoughts that I owed to him—I wanted to prove to him that, thanks to him, I had become worthy of comprehending all pure and virtuous sentiments. Wo to me! wo to me! language failed me—it was impossible for me to express the new and noble ideas which had sprung to life in my soul. In my distress—in my terror—in my wildness—I, who was always so bold—I hesitated, I stammered; a word, a look from him, approving of the change that was manifest in me, would have encouraged me: he would have read, in my heart, that he occupied it wholly—that he had transformed it. But he froze me with his cold and ironical air—I could only utter some broken syllables; yet I never had been more sincere—never had I been inspired with such lofty instincts. Alas! I was unworthy to speak in so noble a language! Oh! Matilda, if grief be an expiation, you will pardon me; for I suffered much on that day."

"Yes, yes; I believe you, unhappy woman! you must have suffered much."

"But that is not all—you do not know what renders my death most terrible."

"Good Heaven! speak, speak!"

"Yes, you, at least, should know that—and you will pity me. When I had taken the poison—when all was over—when I had to do nothing more than die—God, in his dreadful vengeance, suddenly revealed to me the only means by which I could have expiated my faults, and merited the sympathy of him for whom I die, and the esteem of all."

"How is that? but, even now—is there not time?"

"No! no! there is not time! I feel that my end approaches: and it is that—oh! it is that which makes my death so frightful!" cried the wretched creature, with a burst of tears.

"Ursula! Ursula! be calm—you are so young! all hope is not lost, perhaps. God will have mercy, for your good resolutions!"

"Oh, life! life now—that life which I have so wickedly sacrificed! my God! it is not for myself that I implore it of Thee!" cried she, clasping her hands; "it is for that good man whom I have so cruelly wronged—and I vow to Thee, oh, my God! that, by my devotion, my submission, I will make him forget the sorrows I have caused him!"

"Ursula! what say you? this remorse—"

"Do you not understand me? Instead of ending my days by a useless crime, I should have become repentant—should have cast myself at my husband's feet—at the feet of his mother; neither could have remained insensible to a true repentance. I should have passed the rest of my days in making them happy—and I could have done so—I could, I am sure of it: and, some day, after a very long time, when I should have proved that I had become faithful and good, I might, perhaps, have dared to say to him, whose influence had rendered me so—'I was an unworthy and miserable being; I loved you—you never knew it—but that unknown love gave me virtues which I had not before. There is in you something so great, that to love you, even in secret, is to wish to become worthy of you. Since thoughts of you came to purify my heart, all around me love me and bless me.' But, wo to me! it is too late!" she cried, "you see it is too late!"

"Ah, this is horrible!" I exclaimed: "indeed, indeed this reinstatement would have been beautiful and grand——"

"Oh! would it not! would it not! How grand and beautiful it would have been!" replied Ursula, with fervour. "You know me, Matilda—you know my strength of will, my energy. That strength of will, that energy I would have applied to good: I would have been capable of all acts of devotion, of heroism. To restore to my husband a quiet and happy life; to merit the austere esteem of M. de Rochegune; and he would have accorded it to me—to me who, thanks to him, would have ascended from something so low to something so high."

"Poor, poor Ursula!" said I, with deploring sympathy.

"Oh, how generous you are to pity me, Matilda! Is it not horrible to die—so young, with such a future before my eyes—to die abandoned, despised—detested by all—when I might have lived so loved and respected! Is it not horrible! and a dreadful retribution from Heaven!"

The unhappy creature, exhausted by her emotions, could not go on—her voice changed—she sunk through weakness. From the commencement of this interview, my aversion to Ursula nearly vanished, through the pity with which she had inspired me. The love which she felt for M. de Rochegune had something in it so touching, so ennobling; it manifested itself by so elevated a trust in her own regeneration, that I could not but lament with her, the fatality which debarred her from expiating her sins.

Frightened at seeing her in my arms almost without sensation, I called to her husband, who came in, almost beside himself with grief. Ursula breathed with difficulty. Her face was contracted with an expression of desperate pain. The crisis passed off a little, but already was her countenance distorted by the approach of death. She feebly moved her hands before her, as if she would drive away some horrid apparition. At length she opened her eyes, and said, in a failing voice—

"Matilda, you pardon me the evil I have done you?"

"Yes, yes! I pardon you! And God will pardon you, also, on account of your last thoughts."

"My husband, where are you? I know not, but it seems to me that my sight grows dim;" said she, seeking for her husband with a wandering look.

"Ursula! Ursula! I do not want you to die! It was not I who drove you away without pity. Oh! do not accuse me!—do not accuse me! It was my mother who was so unmerciful!—it was my mother!" cried he in anguish—"it was my mother! Wo to me! Wo to her!"

Hardly were these fatal words uttered, when Madame Secherin appeared at the door, which her son had left open. The appearance of this austere woman was, as it always was, pale, immoveable, threatening. She quietly drew nigh, with a sort of formidable majesty.

"An impious son has dared to curse his mother;" said she, in a loud and angry tone.

"Madam, have pity on her," cried I: "Ursula is dying."

"Her death is worthy of her life—she dies by her own criminal act."

"Mercy! madam, mercy!" said Ursula, clasping her hands, and half-rising in her couch, notwithstanding her weakness.

"There is no mercy for you," replied Madame Secherin.

Drawing herself up to her full height, she accompanied these words with a gesture—a tone—a look so terrible, that her son was struck dumb with stupor and fear, as if divine vengeance had come visibly before him in the person of his mother."

"Mercy!" said Ursula again, "mercy!"

"Had you any mercy upon me, when I entreated you to take pity on my son?"

"Oh, I repent, I repent!"

"It is too late!"

"Oh, pardon me! your son has pardoned me! Matilda has pardoned me!"

"There is no pardon for the adultress!"

"Oh, my God!"

"There is no pardon for the reprobate!"

"Mercy!"

"There is no pardon for the suicide!"

"Ah! I am accursed," said Ursula, falling nearly lifelessly upon the sofa.

M. Secherin who had recovered from his first stupour, cried in a voice full of indignation:

"Mother, mother, you are torturing her to death! God will have pity on her!"

"Torture! think of your torture, and mine; how long have they endured?"

"But she repents, mother, she repents!"

"She dreads the punishment of her sins; that is her repentance."

"Yes! it is a farce—a farce. Is it not, mother?"

"Yes! a farce—yes—this vain remorse is a sacrilegious farce—a farce played on the very brink of the tomb which yawns for her." Then addressing her, she said, with increasing indignation—"Through your horrors of eternal punishment, for the last few hours you are repentant—you! During these long years, this wretched man, shut up in the dismal solitude to which you consigned him, has not passed a day—an hour—without shedding tears of blood. You repent for a single day—and, for three long years, I, who had none but him—I, who lived but for him—I have seen, I have partaken of his torture; for a mother suffers all the pangs for which she cannot console her child! And, because you now cry mercy—shall all these torments be forgotten? How, some have lived in worldly joys, and adulterous pleasures, while others have lived in tears and solitary despair. And, because the unworthy cause of all this misery curses the past which appals her—shall the executioner and the victim become equal before the Lord? No, no! there is no mercy for you on earth—no mercy for you in Heaven!"

M. Secherin was about to reply. Ursula took his hand, and with difficulty turning her head towards her mother-in-law, exclaimed: "Alas! madam, what can I do more than repent? Can I subdue my terrors? Have I done wrong—oh! my God! in wishing to ask pardon of those I have wronged before I die? What can a miserable creature do, whom all have forsaken on earth, if in eternity she may not offer the sacrifice of repentance—all that she has to offer—the deep sincerity of remorse? I have done much wrong, madam, to you and to your son, who is the best of men—and to Matilda, who was a sister to me. My life has been very guilty—my death is criminal—I am cursed by you—my father will hear of my death without regret—the world will say that I am justly punished!"

"Yes, justly punished!" repeated Madame Secherin in a deep voice, somewhat changed.

"I do not say this to complain—only madam, you who are so severe, yet withal so just—think, when I was yet a very little child, I was confided to the most wicked of women. Oh! for pity's sake! reflect, that during my childhood and youth, this woman nurtured the worst passions of my nature —hatred, jealousy, and hypocrisy."

"Your cousin was also brought up by that abominable woman;—compare her life with yours!"

Ursula did not give me time to reply, but answered sweetly, while her husband listened to her with a sort of heart-broken adoration.

"My nature was as bad as Matilda's was good; for that reason I should have had noble examples—severe instruction. Perhaps my faults sprung from my fatal education—for I think that I could have been better than I have been," said she, giving me a sad look of intelligence. She then continued. "Ah! if I could only have lived, not by a vain repentance, would I have repaired the evil I have done—but it is too late—too late! It is true, madam—it is the will of Heaven, that I should end a guilty life by a guilty death. No one will pray for me, except the two beings whom I have most injured in all the world."

The features of Madame Secherin appeared to lose something of their rigid expression. Instead of looking at Ursula so angrily, she contemplated her for a few moments with a solemn attention—perhaps moved, in spite of herself, by the aspect of the wretched woman, whom she had last seen in the flower of youth and beauty, in the flush of pride and audacity, and whom she now found struggling with so terrible an agony.

Ursula could not endure the fixed and penetrating looks of her mother, who stood erect and silent above her. She took the hand of her husband, who could hardly stifle his sobs, and said in a voice that grew more and more feeble.

"My presence and my sins have sometimes created a temporary coldness between your mother and yourself—my husband. This is my most sorrowful regret—I implore you to deliver me at least from that. I shall die less unhappy, if I can be sure that you will yield her that consolation, which you have of late neglected. And then, when she sees you once more the good and tender son which you were of yore—as you would always have been without me; perhaps your mother will feel some compassion, when she thinks of one, whom she believed she never could pardon;—of one who would have looked upon her last hour with less dread, could her venerable hands have blessed me. My husband, in this awful moment—give me this sacred promise—I entreat you."

"Oh, I swear it! I swear it!" said M. Secherin, wild with grief.

"But this unhappy creature must not die in this way," suddenly exclaimed Madame Secherin, whose features, at length, expressed a pity which had been long suppressed. "She must not die without prayer, and without a priest."

"The church casts out suicides from her bosom—I have not dared to demand a priest," said Ursula, in a low and trembling voice.

Madame Secherin kneeled down softly by the side of her daughter-in-law;—the tears trickled down her wrinkled cheeks;—she clasped her hands, and cried—"Lord! Lord! her repentance is as great as her sin. I can no longer hate her. Do, thou, pardon her, Lord, as I do!"

"Mother! mother! for my life—all my life—I swear it," said her son; and unable to speak farther, he covered with tears and kisses the hands of his mother.

The face of Ursula grew bright, for an instant, with surprise and joy. She exclaimed: "Oh, my God! thou will take pity on me, for she has pardoned me."

"And I will bless you, poor unhappy woman, and I will pray for you; for they have destroyed—yes, I wish to believe, I do believe, that your heart would have been good, had it not been perverted so early." And Madame Secherin took the head of Ursula between her trembling hands, and kissed her forehead.

"Oh! suffer me, once, for the first and last time, to call you mother!— at this hour, that word is precious to my lips. I think that it will sweeten the bitterness of death."

"Yes—I am your mother—my heart, at last bleeds for you!" cried Madame Secherin, with deep emotion: "I, too, have my regrets—and there is no more time. Perhaps, I should have shown myself less inflexible. I should have treated you like a daughter, and not have closed to you for ever the way of safety, by too great severity."

"Oh! my mother! you have saved my soul from despair! In my last hour—oh! mother! I leave you your son—most worthy of your tenderness," said Ursula.

"Oh, yes—yes—here I swear—my life, my whole life shall be divided between your dear memory, and my veneration for my mother!" cried M. Secherin,—"but God will not suffer you to die; he will grant you time to atone for your faults—to make me happy; he will have pity on me, who have suffered so much, and my poor mother who has also suffered so much. Now, that you are her daughter—that she has pardoned you—now that we can all be happy together—God no longer wills you to die. Is it not so, mother?"

Ursula's strength was exhausted. The last shock was too great. "Mother!" exclaimed she, in a dying voice, "I pray you, support my head—upon your bosom."

Madame Secherin leaned over the couch—slightly raised Ursula's shoulders, and held her in her arms.

"My husband—your hand. Matilda—yours." Alas! her poor emaciated hand, was icy cold; it had not the strength to clasp mine. Ursula continued, growing more and more feeble: "Now, farewell! for ever farewell! Pardon me my offences! Mother—Husband—Matilda—pray for me!"

"My daughter!—my daughter!—I bless you!" said Madame Secherin, in a solemn voice, placing her hands upon the brow of Ursula.

Ursula was dead.

M. Secherin, after transports of furious despair, fell into a state of perfect insensibility. He appeared to see nothing—to hear nothing; he went about mechanically without uttering a word. I assisted Madame Secherin in rendering the last duties to the dead. We passed the night in prayer beside her coffin.

The father of Ursula never desired to see her again, after she had left her husband; he had, for a long time, been sojourning in Germany. Wishing, through fear of scandal, to keep this hapless event a secret, and not knowing to whom to apply respecting the sad formalities, I prayed Doctor Gerard, whose discretion I had already tried, to discharge this painful duty. As Ursula had entreated, I burned all the papers which I found in her secretary. By the size of the package, I thought that it must contain the leaves of the album in which my cousin had written some details of her life, and of which M. Lugarto had sent me a copy, obtained, doubtless, through the treachery of Ursula's maid-servant. That woman, the creature of M. Lugarto, had abandoned Ursula, before or since she poisoned herself, I know not which.

Happily for M. Secherin, he remained in a state of utter forgetfulness—an absolute stranger to all that was passing around him. His mother led him to his wife's chamber: he sat down upon the bed, his arms folded, his eyes fixed, and thus he remained for a long time, silent and motionless.

Many times during the night, while his mother and I were at prayer, he came and kneeled down beside us; but he seemed to imitate us mechanically, and not to understand what we were doing; his looks were always down-cast, and he went back to his chamber without speaking a word. Toward morning, overcome by fatigue and watching, he slumbered in an arm-chair. The church, perhaps with an extreme rigor, refused to receive Ursula's body, and it was carried directly to the sepulchre. I did not leave the sad abode until all had been accomplished.

In all my life—oh! not in all my life shall I forget the heart-rending picture. It was in the middle of autumn. The morning was damp and shrouded in mist. For the last time, Madame Secherin and I went to pray beside the little coffin, exposed in a kind of ante-chamber, on the ground-floor, gloomy and decayed, which opened on the small uncultivated garden. There was no priest, nor chapel, nor holy-water; nothing veiled the horrid nakedness of death. All around was deep silence, broken only by the sighs of the wind as it whistled through the trees, whose yellow leaves, tossed down by sudden gusts, fell almost at our feet. Alas, in spite of the mournful solemnity of this scene, I could not help reflecting, that the last time I had seen Ursula before this, was at a fête, where I beheld her glittering in youth and beauty, dazzling with her wit, grace and accomplishments—environed by flattery.

Blondeau, whom I had sent to watch, came and informed us that the funeral vehicle had arrived. I could not restrain my sobs—I piously kissed the coffin, and, with Madame Secherin and Blondeau, went into the inner apartment. We heard a confused noise of footsteps—some harsh voices—which were in a moment hushed—then a hasty, measured tread, and, afterward, the rumbling sound of a carriage which rolled slowly away.

I wished to cast a last farewell look upon the remains of poor Ursula. I raised the corner of a window-curtain—I saw the hearse going forth alone—all alone—no soul accompanied it. It disappeared—and that was all. There was one horrible moment. The dull sound of the funeral vehicle seemed to echo in the very recesses of M. Secherin's heart. He awoke from his apathy—looked wildly about him—and then, recalling the fearful truth, fell into the arms of his mother, with a piercing cry.

No priest breathed a prayer over the open grave which awaited this unfortunate creature, and which soon closed over her for ever.

Unhappy Ursula! unhappy victim of the devilish malice of Mademoiselle de Maran—who had perverted and ruined a noble and strong nature, so as to make sure of a fitting instrument of her hatred toward me. Poor Ursula! yes, notwithstanding all her errors, she was possessed of some generous instincts: a soul capable of feeling so lofty an affection could never have been hopelessly corrupt. Oh, yes! it was a dreadful misfortune for her to conceive a thought of regeneration, when it was too late to accomplish it. Yes, Ursula would have walked, with her habitual perseverance and firmness, in that honourable and elevated path; she would have applied to good ends, all the charm of her fascination, all the energy of her character. The unhappy woman truly said—"It is, indeed, a manifestation of the divine will and vengeance, when such a future shines brilliantly before our eyes, as the grave waits to ingulf us for ever!"

That day, before returning to my house, I entered the church of St. Thomas Aquinas; I went to the sacristy; I there happily found a priest; I prayed him to say a mass for the repose of the soul of Ursula, and I assisted in the holy office.

Alas, as I went out of the church, my eyes were again filled with tears at the sight of the font, where Ursula and myself, while we were children, took the holy water. In that church, she had taken her first communion with me.

CHAPTER XXIX.

REGRETS.

M. SECHERIN returned to Rouvrai with his mother. Both of them came to see me ere they went; my cousin, still plunged as deep as ever in the gloom of absolute despair, spoke little; but as she bade me adieu, he said in a low voice, and with an air of fierce uneasiness—

"Now! now!—if no one kills your husband, before my mother dies! Ah! it is long—long to wait for vengeance!"

He gave me no time to answer him, but went directly and gave his arm to Madame Secherin. All his hate now was concentrated on my husband—how should it have been otherwise? Ursula had rejoined him at Paris—in the eyes of the world, as well as in those of M. Secherin, M. de Lancry was the author of my cousin's ruin.

I have forgotten to say, that my husband was absent on a journey of some days duration; he did not return until the second day after the death of Ursula. I had no idea how his views would stand with regard to myself, when he should hear of this horrible event.

I could form no plan—henceforth, for ever, I was in his power. My voluntary return to him had riveted my chains for ever; yet his last hopes, destroyed by the suicide of Ursula—what interest could he have in keeping me with him longer?

I reckoned, however, on one last means which I believed infallible, for the recovery of my freedom,

Two days after that awful catastrophe. M. de Lancry entered my room one morning.

"Well," he said, "you must be delighted—you are revenged!"

"How so, monsieur?"

"Your deadliest enemy—Ursula—is she not dead? That must have been a glorious day for you——"

"I closed her eyes piously, monsieur. Her repentance made me forget all my——"

"Oh! surely!"—he interrupted me, with a bitter smile—"surely! this pardoning of injuries is very edifying; and your cousin had given you so much cause as to render it magnanimous likewise."

I was astonished, even terrified, to hear my husband speak thus of a woman for whom he had sacrificed everything. His features, far from the expression of despair, revealed—shall I dare to say it—a sort of gloom: but my astonishment was not yet at its height. Truly, the human heart is a terrible abyss. After having walked to and fro in silence for some moments, he began again, with savage irony at first, increasing gradually into savage exultation:

"Dead!—dead at twenty-five!—dead in the very zenith of her youth and beauty!—I, too, am well avenged!"

"Good God!" I exclaimed in disgust: "this is too horrible! she injured no one but me—and I—I wept over her——"

"You wept over her, did you? That does great honour to your generous sensibility, madam; and proves, moreover, that the grief you affected at my infidelity was all exaggerated!"

"Ah! monsieur——"

"But I—I who know what that accursed woman made me suffer—I who do not profess your generosity—I say—Ursula is dead—so much the better! I am set free from an evil genius. She will belong no more to me—nor to any other. I shall have no more to endure the atrocious agonies of that jealousy, which I dared not express — so strangely did that woman overawe me—so much did I stand in awe of her cruel sarcasms! I shall no longer be tormented by that one fixed, burning agonizing thought—'*where is she? what is she doing?*' I shall no longer writhe in those fits of frenzied despair, in which, since my entire ruin, I have said to myself, she is now laughing at me, with some rich and happy rival—at this very hour, in the lap of luxury and bliss, she is perhaps mocking the idiot, who for her reduced himself to want. Ursula is dead! I am, then, liberated from an entanglement, eternal, odious, and implacable, as though I had defied my destiny to frame it. Yes! for I loved that woman, as I loved gambling—ay! gambling! To me she was an exhaustless source of emotions—pleasurably and unnaturally poignant. Fear, rage, hope, hatred, pride, and ecstacies of pride after those days of expectations;—and hope fifty times rendered hopeless! It was like play, I tell you—as men stake large sums on a single card, so I staked heaps of gold on a single smile! and, as in play, never did the rare joy of winning half compensate the agony, the madness of loving! Ursula is dead! and I am free at last. At last, in my own eyes, a fool no longer. I may one day regret not the loss of her fascinating qualities—but that she ever fascinated me at all. Ursula is dead—dead! For years—for years I have not felt such an expansion of my soul! There is an end, then, of that mysterious, that inexplicable power, which bowed me, broke me, crushed me—made me, at will, a slave, a dastard, and an idiot! Ursula is dead! I am free—free! I shall be never more the senseless and obedient slave of that iron will, against which I—firm as I am, and resolute—had neither energy nor power to struggle. I shall despise myself no more for the weakness I abhorred, yet could not cast aside. Ursula is dead! It is extinguished, then for evermore extinguished; that pitiless glance which enchained me, leaving me but the power to execute, in slavish degradation, her most immoderate commands. She is dead! I shall hear no more her proud and scornful tones—for the accursed creature was but the incarnation of all railleries and insults! When, by her insults, she had lashed every wound of my self love and pride, till it was quivering and bleeding—when, alone even, I was writhing under the awful anguish of that moral shock; methought I could still hear her insolent mocking, her imprecations from afar. She is dead!—at last!—dead! Blessed be God! who sends her down to hell—for she forces us to believe in God, by making us believe in the devil!"

I had not, literally, strength to say a single word, for my terror had increased in proportion to the bursts of savage and ferocious joy which swayed M. de Lancry.

Such then was the end of his fatal passion!—such the regrets which this wretched woman was destined to leave after her! For some time longer, M. de Lancry strode to and fro in violent agitation! then stopping suddenly before me—"And who was the rich, happy man—or the happy, rich man, with whom she was living, when death found her?"

"She died, monsieur, poor and deserted."

"It is because she chose then to be poor. For money was not scarce with me when she left me. Why since our separation has she sent letters to me, making appointments which she has never kept?" said my husband, speaking to himself; then, turning to me with a disdainful smile, he added:

"Doubtless *you* mean to play the generous enemy, in order to keep up to the life your part of the superior woman!—the sublime woman! Well! to render your generosity yet more meritorious, I am willing to tell you, that Ursula hated you so deadly that it was at her instigation I ordered you to return to me."

"The motive then which imposed this obligation on you, monsieur, existing now to longer, you will now doubtless suffer me to live alone. Odious as she was to you, you had then still a reason for keeping me with you, while now——"

"Now I have another reason for keeping you," he replied abruptly, with a spiteful smile.

I imagined I understood what he intended to arrive at. He had several times spoken to me of my diamonds; entirely resolved to give up a part of them to him, if he would give me my liberty, with sufficient guaranties—that it is to say, with a legal separation; I thought it prudent, notwithstanding, rather to let him come to the demand on his own side, than to make an offer on mine.

"I do not understand you, monsieur," said I—"on what account you can desire to retain me any longer. Just now, when you were enumerating your causes of anger against Ursula, you forgot to mention that your unhappy love for her had rendered you most barbarous to me. I do not reproach you, monsieur; I prefer this indifference, which gives me cause to hope that you will make no serious opposition to a separation."

"You deceive yourself, madam; I refuse to set you free, precisely on account of my indifference to you. Ay! of my indifference—to use no stronger term!"

"Hatred, you would doubtless say, monsieur."

"Well! madam, if you like it! Yes! hatred!—at the point to which we have come, it is just as well that you should know all. Yes, madam, I do hate you, now—does that surprise you? Well, listen. You shall now learn what I am, what you are; then you will make me no more absurd requests—you will nourish no more chimerical ideas. Let us come to facts. You brought me a noble fortune—you were an angel in sweetness, resignation, virtue—I married you—without any love for you. It is the point now to speak frankly."

"It is a long time, monsieur, that you have ceased to dissemble—but to what tends all this?"

"You shall know," he said, interrupting me; "I married you, as I say, without loving you—you were a rich heiress—I played my part of making myself such a paragon, as men always make themselves in such cases. You believe me, because you chose to believe me. Our honey-moon over—it lasted as long as it could last. Love passed thus; I retained for you a sort of mild compassion. You were good, submissive, resigned; you were always crying about nothing; that was not very gay—but it was moving—and touched me sometimes so sincerely, that, during the persecutions of Lugarto, I risked everything to deliver you from that faithless friend. At a later period, during your constant jealousy of Ursula—the interesting state in which you were at that time, your tears, your deep sorrow, your love, still as strong as ever—all these conspired to move me. You have yourself seen, that I had some returns to good and kindly feelings—even some *virtuous* resolutions. But then, you were still rich—but then you were always humble, always tender and loving."

"It is yourself, monsieur, who did everything to annihilate, both those riches, and that love!"

"And in consequence you are now neither rich nor loving. That is precisely the point at which I desire to arrive. The times, then, are changed—of your fortune there remains not a vestige. Whether that is your fault or mine, matters nothing—there stands the fact—you are ruined! This is not all: you are not only ruined, but you do not love me, and do love another—not only you do love another, but you detest me; and you have hounded together all the prudes of your acquaintance against me! Now, frankly, what are you to me now?—a woman, poor, hostile, of a reputation at least doubtful. Your beauty remains to you, it is true—but I would not do you the wrong of affixing a price to that. Now, madam, on the terms between us, I ask you what you can reasonably look for from me—if, as must be the case, you make your considerations with reference to the qualities of people?"

"You are perfectly logical and clear. I will conclude, if you please, the exposition of your situation with regard to me. If I were only poor, but submissive, and devoted to your slightest wish, you would perhaps do me the favour of being perfectly indifferent to me. But since chance has taught me your utter baseness, since I have earned the right of openly despising you, hate has replaced indifference."

"You make deductions, and reason admirably well, madam; I could not have said it better myself. Yes! although ruined, you would have won from me, perhaps interest—probably compassion—certainly indifference. But to do so, you must have remained ever loving and resigned."

"You are generous, monsieur."

"No, madam! but I am very original. I never was in love with you—be it so—but I liked to feel myself adored by you. Platonic, or not platonic, your affair with Rochegune, and above all, your choice of that man, whom I detest, gave a violent wound to my self-pride. That wound has rankled to such a degree as to cause my violent hatred. You will tell me that Rochegune has outrageously deceived you. His marriage proves it, if you did not; but this does not avenge me, and there remains a terrible account to be reckoned with you, madam."

"I am obliged to you for this confidence, monsieur; it is as much as to tell me, that there is no treatment for which I may not look at your hands."

"Nearly so, madam."

"Then, monsieur, the most delicate questions may be asked plainly. According to your rights, you sold all the furniture of the little dwelling I occupied at Madame de Richeville's—my plate and pictures. This money you have squandered, I presume, for since I have been here, I have lived on some small savings I still had, which are now all gone. Will you inform me what are your plans for our future support, monsieur?"

"No, madam?"

"You, however, still persist in keeping me with you?"

"Still, madam."

"Notwithstanding the death of Ursula?"

"Notwithstanding the death of Ursula."

"And what, monsieur, will be the means of my subsistence?"

"I will provide means."

"You will provide means! How so, monsieur?"

"Does that concern you, madam?"

"It concerns me much, monsieur! There are certain resources which I will never share with you—those of infamy——"

"Madam!—but I will contain myself—to talk to me thus, at this moment, you must be mad——"

"I am not mad, monsieur. I am now obliged to say to you nearly what I said on our first interview, at my house."

"If it has been said before—to what end, madam?"

"I wish to try, at least, monsieur, to deliver myself from the horrible chain which weighs me to the earth—that is very natural. You have inquired of me what has become of my diamonds?"

"Yes, madam."

"And those diamonds are worth——"

"About fifty thousand crowns."

"Well, monsieur, half that sum shall be yours, if you will consent to a separation by the forms of law; the rest will be enough—"

"I am about to return, madam, to what I have said before, like yourself. I will not have half the value of your diamonds, and I will keep you with me——"

"But, monsieur, I can offer you nothing more. I must live, too ——"

"Even if you should offer me fifty thousand crowns, I would refuse them."

A terrible idea occurred to me at this moment.

"Monsieur, you have, as well as I, had many proofs of the presence of M. Lugarto in Paris."

"What next, madam?"

"You have a thousand motives for hating this man; I know it—but you love money—almost as much as you detest me, monsieur."

"What next, madam?"

"That man is rich, monsieur. Like you, he hates me! like you, he has a terrible account to reckon with me!"

"What next, madam?"

"Reduced as you are, to absolute distress, if you refuse the sum I offer you, it must be that you have other expectations."

"What next, madam?"

Maddened by this atrocious cold bloodedness—by my indignation, and my fears, I cried out:

"Well, monsieur, I believe you capable of anything toward me, if M. Lugarto were to pay you for keeping me with you—to pay you a higher price than I can give you to let me go free."

M. de Lancry fixed a long, cold, cruel gaze upon me; but not a feature of his face betrayed a sign of emotion.

"You are not absolutely without a certain sort of quick-sightedness, madam, and I pity you. It is a fatal gift. It gives the means of foreseeing calamities, not of avoiding them. I will, therefore, confess it to you, it may be that your fears are by no means exaggerated. But what can you do? In order to give you an idea of the state of passive obedience to which you are reduced, suppose that to-morrow morning a travelling Berlin should stop at your door—that I should offer you my arm—hand you into the carriage—ordering you to leave your eternal Blondeau behind———"

"I should refuse to go, monsieur, or to separate myself from a woman whose fidelity I know to be the proof———"

"You would refuse? Well, all the same for that!—the law which would have compelled you to follow me hither to the *rue de Bourgogne*, will also oblige you to follow me whithersoever I may choose to order you. We will continue my hypothesis—we set out—five or six posts from here we find one of my old friends or enemies, just which you please to call him; I choose to make him my travelling companion. What have you got to say to that? Does the law prescribe the number or the choice of my friends? Does the law interfere with my forgiving wrongs done to me? I mention this in case, for instance, it should chance to be Lugarto. You are frightened—you have not a word to say—that is plain enough. I proceed with my hypothesis—we leave France, and go to live in a superb villa which Lugarto owns at Florence. Again, what objection can you make? none! It suits me to live in a foreign country—you must follow me—follow me whithersoever I choose to carry you: will the law take account of your antipathies? You see, then, that you are mad to talk about your will. You are forbidden to have any will—you can but obey mine, which is your fate, thanks to the hatred of your aunt. And observe now the fatality. It has just happened, at the very moment when Mademoiselle de Maran, owing to her age and infirmities, can pursue you no longer with the same bitterness of enmity, you have set yourself to work to exasperate me and irritate me against you! You say, madam, that I love money; and that I am capable of anything, if I am well paid. That is perfectly true—extravagance has this good—or bad—quality, that it is immortal. I should take just as much delight now in leading a splendid life, as if I were but just entering the world. Play, horses, women, good living, luxury—I still love them all with the ardour of a boy of eighteen; with an ardour the more devouring, that my passion for your accursed cousin seduced me from enjoying the luxuries with which I surrounded her. It was a festival, which I was giving, but in which I could take no part. In a word, he would put me now in a position to sacrifice largely to my cherished idols—not here, but elsewhere, for I detest Paris. In a word, he who should put no bounds to his generosity, but the condition of dragging you about in my train—to him would I reply—'Yes! yes! and a thousand times—yes! even if it were Lugarto.' All this astonishes you a little—ponder upon this language at your leisure—consult even your lawyers on the subject, if you please, and you will find, that should that be the prospect fate has in reserve for you, you have only to submit yourself thereto. It is impossible, I think, to deal with you more frankly than I do. In one word, and in order to leave you a pleasant train of reflections, I will add, that it is highly possible, that the aforesaid travelling schemes may be very quickly realized—perhaps—the day after-to-morrow."

And with these words, M. de Lancry went out and left me alone.

CHAPTER XXX.

ST. CLARA'S DAY.

My conversation with M. de Lancry, and the terror which his threats produced on me, without doubt brought on an attack, the seeds of which were lying dormant in my constitution.

For some time past I had been suffering from a low fever, long neglected. Events had occurred in such quick succession, and I had been compelled to take in them a part so active—all my faculties had been so violently overexcited, from the first illness of Emma to her marriage, and the death of Ursula; that I had not, if I may so express myself, had the time to be sick.

Moreover, in proportion as my self-sacrifice had been great—whatever it might perhaps have seemed for me in the eyes of heaven—it had but been —it was but the more painful. It was natural, that sooner or later I must suffer the consequences of these sorrows. I already felt that a heavy illness was darkly overhanging me. I had said, even to my poor Blondeau, who was wondering at my courage—" Do not begin to rejoice yet; the moment I cease to have most exciting occupations, I feel that I shall have a violent reaction both physical and moral. Up to this moment I have been sustained by my energies alone—I fear that this artificial strength will fail me suddenly-"

I was not disappointed; only the shock was not brought on by the cessation of uneasiness, but by my last conversation with M. de Lancry.

In it was the explanation of a passage in one of M. Lugarto's letters, in which he wrote, that *he would create imperious reasons why my husband should not give me up, and that I had yet much to dread in future.*

M. de Lancry was without means. M. Lugarto, unquestionably, had offered him large sums to induce him to take me with him. I dare not tell you all the horrors which I imagined, knowing the debasement of M. de Lancry, his love of gold, his hatred of me, and above all, the atrocious wretchedness of M. Lugarto, who, for so long a time, had persecuted me with his vengeance. I have no doubt, that these new terrors caused a last agitation of my mind, which was too powerful for my strength to resist.

Scarcely had M. de Lancry left me before I fell into strong convulsions, followed by a violent brain fever. I was, by what Blondeau and good Dr. Gerard told me, fifteen days in a hopeless state. M. de Lancry disappeared the next day but one after that on which I had fallen ill, leaving a letter, in which he informed me chiefly that my illness had changed all his projects, and that he had gone to travel in Italy. This proof of cruel insensibility neither surprised nor afflicted me.

My poor Blondeau had written to inform Madame de Richeville of the melancholy state in which I was lying. That excellent friend returned immediately to Paris, with Emma and M. de Rochegune. It had been impossible to think of moving me from my little lodging in the rue de Bourgogne. Madame de Richeville took up her quarters there with me, until such time as should enable me to remove with her to Maran, there to pass the time necessary for my complete recovery.

Every day, Emma passed several hours with me until I was completely well again. I have no wish to record the kind attention by which I was surrounded, or the extreme devotion by which Emma endeavoured to show her gratitude for the services I had fortunately rendered her. My brain fever had changed its type to that of another, of a complicated order, the recovery from which was so slow and tedious, that it was not until four months had passed, and the winter was nearly at an end.

Toward the middle of the summer of 1837, I was then living upon that estate; and if my health was not yet completely re-established, at least it could not be said that I was an invalid. I continued extremely pale, very weak, and with much tendency to nervous irritation. Doctor Gerard had pronounced it absolutely indispensable to my recovery, that I should pass the following autumn and winter in the South. I had returned to Maran with very painful recollections; I had suffered there so deeply. But ever since my recovery, Madame de Richeville had lived with me there. M. de Rochegune and Emma came to join us later in the season, and their kind affections all tended to soften down the bitterness of the thoughts which from time to time assailed me.

It required, however, all my courage, all my strength, and all my resignation, to subdue the sad impression which the affectionate attachment of M. de Rochegune for Emma sometimes, in my own despite, produced upon me. This marriage had been the aim of all my efforts. I should have been the most unhappy of women had it not been accomplished; yet I could not avoid experiencing the bitterest and most cruel affections.

Alas! soured by so many sorrows, I was perhaps losing some of the natural elevation of my mind. The light of Emma's happiness and that of Madame de Richeville to which I had so much contributed, charmed me unquestionably, but it made me think [illegible]o of the unhappy life to which I was myself reduced.

I could not refrain, oftentimes, from instituting comparisons between my own state, and that of the happy people around me—not that I was jealous of them, oh! my God! no—but that I wept over my own misery—yes! my own misery; for though dead to all outward seeming, my passion was not the less deep. I loved—I still loved M. de Rochegune.

We were to celebrate, by a family party at Maran, St. Clara's day—the birth day of Madame de Richeville; on the 12th of August, 1837.

It will appear shortly, why it is that I cannot forget either that day, or that date.

It was eleven o'clock in the morning—the sun was shining very brightly—I was walking in one of the most sheltered alleys of the park, which joined that wing of the chateau in which were situated the apartments of Madame de Richeville. The duchess did not rise till it was very late. I waited only for Emma, who was to have gone with me to pay her compliments to her mother, and to carry her a bouquet of roses and jessamines, her two favourite flowers, which we proposed to gather with our own wands.

I saw M. de Rochegune coming to meet me; I put out my hand—"How beautiful a day for the birthday of our dear friend;" said I with a smile, showing him my nosegay. "Is Emma's bouquet as handsome as this?"

"She completed hers, by plundering one of the baskets in the little border. There could be nothing prettier than to see her plunging herself in the thick clusters of the rose bushes *du Roi*, all dripping, as they were, with dew!"

"I hope you composed a beautiful madrigal for her on that topic—and yet—not so either—the carnation of her cheeks is so delicate, that it would be a sin to compare her to a rose *du Roi*. It would be the same as calling her complexion *ruddy* instead of rosy—a tea-rose of Bengal—if you please; that would then be the only comparison that could do her justice."

"And you, my poor Matilda," he replied, looking at me with deep interest, "to what shall we ever again be able to compare you, but to a pure white lily?—when will your paleness ever be relieved by the least tinge of the rose?"

"Dr. Gerard reckons much upon my visit to the South, to re-establish me completely, and I reckon on it too, my friend."

He looked at me attentively while I was speaking, and said to me, shaking his head sadly—

"And must you be the only one among us, who is not happy:—you to whom we all owe the happiness which we enjoy?"

"What an idea, my good friend! Is not my paleness natural after a long illness?"

"Matilda, it will not do. It is evident that your husband afflicts you—you never receive letters from him."

"M. de Lancry is never a very regular correspondent—and the mails from Italy are never very regular, as I hear."

"Ah! Matilda, Matilda! I must fall back to the same point. How," added he with a sigh—"how is it possible that he could have left you at the moment when you felt so dangerously ill. There is no possible business of sufficient weight to excuse such conduct."

"My friend, I repeat to you again—it concerned a large credit, of which he had long given up all hopes, and which, in our actual position, was excessively important. I say, our position, because, according to the advice of yourself and Madame de Richeville, I concealed from him that this estate had been preserved, fearing that his ancient habits of extravagance might return upon him. When we once see him perfectly corrected by adversity, I will confess to him that we have it still. At present he is entirely ignorant of the fact; and it is therefore quite natural that he should apply himself actively to this business."

M. de Rochegune shook his head incredulously; I doubtless told my falsehood with a bad grace. But I could think of no other method of accounting for my husband's departure; while, to allow him to penetrate the truth of my position with regard to my husband, would have but put him on the track of my self-devotion to Emma;—the thing which I wished at all risks to avoid, now that I had given up the wise idea of recalling the whole affair to M. de Rochegune.

"I must believe you," replied M. de Rochegune, with a sigh. "You always answer me thus when I speak to you of M. de Lancry; but, I know not why it is, there always appears to me to be more mystery in his conduct toward you. I cannot but fear that you are not happy. No! you are not happy. You must have been the dupe of your own good heart, as your husband was, perhaps, the dupe of his own good resolutions. During some time, I admit that he may have repented sincerely; but his old habits must have gained the upper hand, and he has preferred leading I know not what life of adventure, to living in obscurity with you. Moreover—but stay, Matilda, I will not speak what I think—I suppose I am mistaken, and should only grieve you."

"You are right, my dear friend, let us speak of this no more—do not be in the least degree uneasy. It is only sometimes—through M. de Lancry's habitual dislike to writing—that I get a little disgusted at not hearing from him. That makes me a little sad just now; and to drive away these disagreeable thoughts, let us speak of yourself and Emma, and of all your plans."

"Speak of ourselves, is speaking still of you, so much do we owe to you. As for me, never has my life been calmer, sweeter, more serene—and then, Emma, too, is happy—and with so little effort! Sometimes, poor child, I almost reproach myself with doing so little for her. I am almost embarrassed to see her so easily satisfied and contented."

"Speaking so modestly, as you do, of the happiness which you confer, you are like the great poets, who think it very simple to achieve magnificent works with perfect facility; and who are astonished at the great influence of works, which cost them so little."

"No: I assure you, Matilda, I appear to give all, and, in reality, I receive much more than I give. I am very happy: I am not conscious of the act of living. If, by any chance, I step out of this delicious state of calm and confident security, to make any plans for the future, it is only to return to it with new pleasure. What shall I say more? This life has not, perhaps, the grandeur, the enthusiasm, or the sublime transports of passion; but it is peaceful and tranquil. After the life which I once dreamed of sharing with you, I know of none more agreeable than that which I now lead. During the early period of my married life, I sometimes used to wish that a warmer sentiment had unfolded itself within me. Now, I should regret it. It would deprive my attachments for Emma of that character which renders it unlike any other."

"You are right, my dear friend, once more. The sort of exclusive worship which Emma cherishes for you, puts it out of your sphere to offer her any return of gallantry. Let your modesty be alarmed by this confession—but the gods, good as they may be, love not in the same way that they are loved."

"Oh! Matilda," he replied, smiling—"I feel the touch of Mademoiselle de Maran's *claw*, under the veil of that sneering *apotheosis*."

"I esteem you too much to exaggerate my praises. Confess that there is some truth in what I say to you, and that my confession is as just as a comparison can be."

"I do not deny Emma's foolish idolatry for me—I must be blind, as well as ungrateful, to do so. I deny only that I am deserving of it, or rather—stay, I am going to surprise you. I accept the comparison just as it stands—especially on account of my *apotheosis!*"

"That is very happy," I answered with a smile.

"I accept it, not as flattering words of praise, but as a just reproach, full of reason and of truth."

"Let me understand you, my friend, as to this blame, which was, I assure you, far indeed from my thoughts."

M. de Rochegune answered, seriously—"You judge of my heart more correctly than I do myself. The vague reproaches which I have been making myself on the score of not doing enough for Emma, have no other reason than the sort of *apotheosis* of which you have spoken, and to which I have lent myself. I have *suffered myself to be loved.* I have lived too much like a sultan. I am too much like those false gods, who by dint of being admired, have ended by believing in their own divinity, and by persuading themselves that they have done poor mortals a great favour in permitting themselves to be idolized. Seriously, Matilda, you have enlightened me; perhaps you have saved Emma many tears. Some day or other she might have discovered, or fancied, in the indolence of my happiness, either selfishness or coldness; and I should suffer everlasting anguish, even to cause one moment's grief to a being so angelic."

"It is I, now, who ought to reproach you with being as spiteful as Mademoiselle de Maran," said I, smiling. "I made an observation to you, not as a compliment but as a simple truth, and you manufactured out of it a sarcasm against yourself."

"By the way, speaking of Mademoiselle de Maran, do you know that her paralysis is now almost entire?" said M. de Rochegune. "My old valet de chambre, Stok, on what account I have not the least idea, went some time since to see Servier, your aunt's old *maitre d'hotel*. It seems that all her servants treat her abominably, but she is obliged to endure it—raving all the while, for no one takes the slightest interest in her."

Our conversation was interrupted by Emma, who came in with a bouquet of roses in one hand, and several letters which she presented to her husband, in the other.

"The courier has just arrived. Here are your letters, dearest."

M. de Rochegune said to her, as he put the letters into his pocket, "Is Madame de Richeville ready to receive us, my dear Emma?"

"Oh! yes," said Emma, "she has been conversing for half an hour, or more, with the good Abbé Dampierre."

"Your *curé*, my lady of the castle," said M. de Rochegune to me.

"And he is the worthiest, and the poorest of all the curates in the country," said I; "you can form no idea of his charity—of his purely evangelical character."

"And how simply and nobly he preaches!" said Emma. "Last Sunday, at church, I was in perfect admiration. All that he said was within the comprehension of his parishioners, and yet the sermon might have been delivered before the king and his court."

"That is because there is, really, nothing more imposing than simplicity," said M. de Rochegune. "I do not know a man of sounder reason, or more accurate judgment, than the Abbé Dampierre. What Emma says is very true. His language would be striking anywhere, yet he has no suspicion of it. He is completely ignorant of his own great qualities. He is one of those men, on whom I set the highest esteem. The union of greatness and modesty is so rare—it is like grace and beauty, when combined with modesty. Let it be perfectly understood, Emma, that this is not meant for you; our sister Matilda would never forgive me. She is jealous of all praises addressed to you, by any one but herself."

While M. de Rochegune was speaking, Emma never took her eyes off him. It was not love, it was a passionate and constant adoration—she did not live in herself, but in him. Almost always, after these moments of ecstatic contemplation, during which she appeared to inhale long draughts of happiness, she used to glance at me with a look of ineffable gratitude.

When M. de Rochegune had spoken, she took his hand, and said, with an enchanting accent—"Our sister Matilda is right—it is she only, who flatters me deliciously."

"Indeed! better than I?"

"Why, certainly; you, dearest, you speak to me about myself—she speaks to me about you; and is it not being praised beyond expression, when I am told that you love me?"

"I admit this, in the understanding that, when Matilda tells me that you love me, she is also praising me beyond expression."

Emma shook her pretty blond head, and said, with a smile—"Ah! it is not the same thing—nothing is simpler than to live; yet people never wish you joy of living, unless when you are very happy."

We passed a charming morning with Madame de Richeville. I invited the Abbé Dampierre to dine with us, in order to celebrate our little family festival.

It was three o'clock, when M. de Rochegune knocked at my door. I was surprised at his exceeding paleness, and the gloomy expression of his countenance. He held in his hand an open letter.

"Matilda, I have letters from Italy. I beg you to read this;" and he pointed out a passage in the letter, which he presented to me, I read therein as follows:

"On my arrival at Naples, the general topic of conversation was the extraordinary extravagances which M. Lugarto had committed in that town;—of the extent of his debaucheries, and his abominable crimes—some of which were so loudly bruited, that the king had banished him from his dominions, without the slightest remonstrance on the part of the Brasilian minister, who perfectly well knew the character and deserts of his countryman;—who, for that matter, is thoroughly and justly execrated, by every person of his own nation. This did not astonish me at all, for I knew Lugarto of old; but what staggered me—what, indeed, I should not have believed, if our ambassador had not assured me of it—is, that the intimate friend, and boon companion of Lugarto is the Viscount de Lancry; who formerly fought with him on a very grave subject of dispute, as I was told, for I was not in Paris at the time. It is said that M. de Lancry is completely ruined, and wholly dependent on his old enemy. They left Naples in a steamer, chartered by Lugarto; and, it is said, there was but one voice in all the town, at their departure, wishing for a combination of all possible accidents which might occur to render their voyage fatal!"

I suffered the letter to fall upon my knees, without daring to look at M. de Rochegune. "Ah! Matilda," he said, in accents of deep reproach, "you have deceived me. The intimacy of M. de Lancry with that monster tells me even more than I could have dreamed of."

"I must confess it—yes! I have wished to conceal it from you. As you guessed—the good resolutions of my husband did not last. His return was sincere, but he grew tired of that obscure and peaceful life I now believe, as you do, that the reason he gave for his departure to Italy, was but a pretext."

"And his connection with the monster, who formerly pursued you with such deadly hate—how will you term that?"

Alas! I dared not—I could not tell him the recent proofs which I had received of Lugarto's obstinate and undying enmity, so much were the events involved connected with my self-sacrifice to Emma.

I made him no reply.

"So, then," exclaimed M. de Rochegune, with an uncontrollable burst of mournful indignation—"it was for such a man as this, that you sacrificed me—it was for such a man as this that you refused the happiness I offered you, when I undertook to——"

I cut him short in a tone so firm, that it imposed silence on him instantly. "Not a word on that subject! It is not you—not you, that should dare, now, to express so much as a single regret for what has passed away. It would be horribly wicked to Emma, who makes you so happy; to me it would be insulting. Whether my husband henceforth treats me well or ill, is not the question now. If the attachment I feel for him were to vanish to-morrow, I would die a thousand deaths rather than forget my duty: I swear it to you, by the memory of my mother. As for you, you are incapable of ever suffering this unhappy child to suppose that you regret having married her. You know her character—think of it—you would kill her; she would die of despair——"

"Ah! this is hideous!" he exclaimed, hiding his head in his hands, and rushing violently out of the room.

I was less terrified, even at learning the reunion of M. de Lancry and M. Lugarto, than at the effect the news had produced on M. de Rochegune. I believed him, indeed, to be incapable of allowing Emma to suspect that he regretted marrying her; but yet I trembled, lest he might accidentally betray himself.

Alas! that day which had begun so happily advanced with fatal passages. And oh, how wretchedly it ended!

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE ABBE DAMPIERRE.

M. DE ROCHEGUNE was sufficiently the master of himself, to prevent the emotions which distracted him from being so much as even suspected.

We had assembled, after dinner, in the little summer parlour—the Abbé Dampierre, Madame de Richeville, Emma, and myself.

The Abbé Dampierre was an old man, with white hair, and an imposing countenance; his voice, at once full and sonorous, gave a character of weight to his slightest words.

I think I can see the scene still before me.

At the end of the parlour sat Madame de Richeville, on an ottoman, with the Abbé beside her; I was separated from Emma by the table, on which the servants were setting the coffee-things. M. de Rochegune had just gone out to answer some letters; for the mail from Tours passed at nine o'clock in the evening toward Paris, so that there was time to answer by the same day's post letters received that morning.

Stok, M. de Rochegune's old valet de chambre, entered, and said to Emma—offering her a letter on a salver:

"A letter that came with those of monsieur's this morning, and which he forgot to give to Madame la Marquise."

"A letter for me?" said Emma, laughing. "It is the first that I have received since I have been here. A Paris letter too," she added, looking at the envelope. "It must certainly have been among those which I brought this morning to M. de Rochegune, and I must have overlooked it."

"Quick; let us see who is your correspondent, my dear child," said Madame de Richeville, smiling.

"With your permission, Monsieur l'Abbé," said Emma. The Abbé Dampierre bowed. Emma broke the seal of the letter, read the first line, and said "it is an application for charity."

"Read it aloud, my dear," said Madame de Richeville, "we will join in your charity."

Emma then read as follows:

MADAM:

It is a wretch who applies to you in confidence, and hopes that you will listen to the prayer of a wretched woman, who fell a victim to her weakness, and to her own heart, and who has no excuse to offer, save the violence of the guilty passion which carried her away.

Emma stopped short, looked at Madame de Richeville, and the Abbé. The latter shrugged his shoulders and replied, "Can there possibly be a worse excuse? It is like complaining of the ravages of a conflagration after kindling the fire ourselves. Do not you think so, Madame la Duchesse?"

"Certainly, Monsieur l'Abbé," replied Madame de Richeville, a good deal embarrassed; for notwithstanding her expiation of her faults, she had always retained a painful susceptibility touching her conduct—then addressing herself to Emma, she said, "Proceed, my dear."

Emma went on.

My parents married me, very young, to a man who has made my whole life wretched. His faults, and his cruel treatment, were the sole cause of my misconduct; I dare swear it to you, before God.

"Oh!" cried the abbé, indignantly, "to call God to witness her shame! what sacrilege!"

"That is true, Monsieur l'Abbé," said Emma, modestly; "how can any one dare to make such an avowal? and, moreover, can anything in the world excuse such misconduct?" she asked of Madame de Richeville! "It seems to me that if my husband did me wrong, instead of imitating him, I should endeavour to bring him back to me by tenderness and resignation—and then, at least, one could pray God to pardon him his faults, and the prayers of true hearts are always heard."

"Ah, madam," said the abbé, showing his emotion in his voice and manner, addressing himself to Madame de Richeville, and pointing to Emma—"this is your work—these are the fruits of the education you have given her."

Madame de Richeville blushed and made him no reply. But her look told me how painful was this conversation. I felt the same myself, but knew not how to bring it to a close. Emma read on:

My husband has abandoned me these four years, madam, and since then I know not what has become of him. I hardly dare, madam, to write these words so great is my embarrassment. It is for a wretched little creature just born, which is not HIS *daughter, that I venture to beseech your charity.*

"Ah! this infamous," cried the abbé.

Emma replied not a word; but she made a gesture so contemptuous, and so full of scorn, as she cast the letter on the ground at her feet, that her silence, and the severe expression of her countenance, were as expressive as the severest words.

Never—oh! my God!—never shall I forget the agonies which Madame de Richeville could conceal no longer—her shame, her blushes. Her eyes met mine; she indicated Emma to me by a glance, and I understood her. The miserable mother felt that she was herself condemned by her daughter, in consequence of the very principles of excellence which she had herself instilled into her.

Madame de Richeville could not hinder herself from saying, indirectly, a few words in her own defence.

"My dear," she said, sadly. "you should have a little pity for the guilty. Perhaps this unhappy mother, blameable as she may be, is still to be pitied."

"Madam," said the Abbé Dampierre, in a firm voice, "I am a priest; I am an old man; do you permit me to speak to you in all sincerity?"

"To be sure, Monsieur l'Abbé; I will pray you so to do," her confusion increasing as she spoke.

"Well, madam; it is to be regretted that persons like you, and other ladies, who might use the influence of their own examples—their own blameless lives —to condemn vice severely, are two often indulgent to it, through a false sentiment of pity. In truth, madam, is it just to grant to disgraceful and deserved misfortune, as much interest as to noble and touching calamities?"

"Monsieur l'Abbé is perfectly correct," said I, alarmed at the turn the conversation was taking. "Pick up that letter, Emma; we will make some inquiries about the woman. It may be a trick to gain our charity; say no more of it now."

"I will finish the letter, nevertheless," said Emma, simply; "but I confess, that what M. l'Abbé has just said, completely deprives me of all interest in this woman. How can she dare to blame her husband, when she degrades herself, perhaps, even more than he does?"

"You are very severe, Emma," said her unhappy mother, endeavouring to conceal a tear, which rushed into her eyes. Emma replied to her with a smile of exceeding candour:

"That is true: you have brought me up with ideas so noble—the example you have given me is such—that I cannot hinder myself from feeling an insurmountable repugnance to everything that is low or criminal. How many times have you told me, that virtue is to women what courage is to men. I detest cowardice!" and again she read as follows:

Although unfortunate, I have not deserved my lot. My education—my birth—seemed to predict a different destiny for me. I dare to hope that these considerations will move you in my favour; and, at all events, madam, my child—my poor little girl—ought not to be, cannot be held responsible for the guilt of its mother. If I deserve blame, my child deserves pity. If the world has the right to stigmatize me for misconduct, I should have the right to accuse those of insensibility, who will not compassionate my child.

The Abbé Dampierre could not restrain a gesture of noble passion, as he exclaimed. "Unhappily, this wretch merely repeats what all who are like her say—all that she cites in her behalf, ought to be cited for her condemnation!"

"Her education, above all, certainly goes to render her unpardonable," said Emma to Madame de Richeville; "do not you think so? Might not those very true words, which you have so often repeated to me, and which I have not forgotten, be applied to this woman? 'Formerly, it was said, *Nobility is an obligation to virtue;* now, the same remark should be applied to education. Faults increase in magnitude, in proportion to the degree of the mind's culture.' Such were your words."

"Madam, the duchess was right to a nicety," said the abbé; "but that is not all. Observe how vice always betrays itself, by the absurdity of its vile and hypocritical language. In crying out—as she does in this letter, 'My child ought not to be responsible for her mother's faults'—this woman imagines that she is absolved from one of the greatest curses that afflict humanity: that of stamping for ever, with the brand of universal reprobation, an unhappy and innocent being."

"Ah! it is horrible!" exclaimed Madame de Richeville, looking despairingly at me. The Abbé Dampierre, believing that the exclamation of the duchess was called forth by her approbation of his discourse, continued, warmly:

"And I have not said enough; for I cast the same cursing stamp of guilt upon the mother who kills her child, and on her who devotes it to a life of suffering and shame."

"Ah! monsieur!" exclaimed Madame de Richeville.

"Yes, madam; a criminal wife is necessarily a bad mother—for is she not aware of the terrible moral and social necessity which exists for rendering the child answerable for the mother's guilt? Does she not know that it is out of the pale of common law—that it has neither family nor name—that its lips may never pronounce that cherished name of mother—or that, if indeed it know the guilty secret of its birth, it is only to be compelled, despite itself, to despise those whom God intended it to cherish and to honour?"

"Oh! yes!" said Emma; "it is fearful. A mother, who exposes her child to the risk of one day despising her—does she not make it curse the existence which it only owes to a crime? To be compelled to despise a mother! my God! death would be ten times less terrible!"

"Oh! Emma!" I exclaimed; but she looked at me in ingenuous astonishment, and added, "What do you mean, my dearest friend?"

Madame de Richeville, who had been on the point of betraying herself, continued her emotion, but turned very pale.

"In truth, my dear child," I said to Emma; "you throw too much warmth into this discussion. Moreover, these are disagreeable ideas; let us talk of something else. I think, as you do, that the manner in which your charity is asked in this letter, should scarcely interest you. The evening is magnificent; I feel that I have a litte headache coming on—let us go and take a walk in the park."

But Emma, by some strange fatality, seemed obstinately bent on reading this letter to the end. I feared that my insisting would appear too singular, even if I should succeed in hindering her; and besides, a glance from Madame de Richeville, who had completely recovered her composure, reassured me.

"There are but a few more lines," she said; "it will be finished instantly;" and, as she spoke, she again read:

You, more than any one, madam, should compassionate my calamity, or rather that of my child.

"Why I?—why should I, more than any one else, be interested in this woman?"

"Leave it!" I almost screamed; "leave it unread, my dearest girl! I tell you the woman must be mad!" and compelled, by a sort of inexplicable presentiment of evil, I sprang forward to take the letter from the hand of Emma. But it was too late. She had already perused it to the end; and her eyes, still rivetted upon that fatal paper, seemed marvellously and terribly dilated. Her lips quivered convulsively, she turned as pale as death;—then, with a motion quick as thought, she cast herself at the feet of Madame de Richeville, exclaiming in a voice of anguish:

"If you be my mother, oh! pardon me! pardon me! curse me not!"

To paint that scene would be impossible. The duchess, thunderstruck by those words, sat like a statue, pale, dumb, motionless.

The Abbé Dampierre raised himself suddenly, and clasped his hands with an expression of agony. Emma, sobbing and speechless, buried her face in her mother's lap. After a few minutes of the deepest silence, Madame de Richeville, moving her daughter aside gently, and taking her by the hand, raised her to her feet; stood up herself, and addressed the Abbé Dampierre with a tone, exquisitely blending dignity with resignation.

"My father! *I* have merited all the reproaches which you have uttered against guilty mothers. Emma is my daughter. During long years I have striven to expiate my sin; but the Lord has this day seen good to inflict on me a grievous chastisement. His will be done!—I despair not of his infinite mercy!"

The Abbé Dampierre replied, in a voice which testified how seriously he was afflicted:

"The truth, madam, is for all. The duty of a servant of the Lord, is to cause it to be heard by all here below; but God alone condemns and absolves. You have said it, madam—His mercy is infinite! At the day of judgment out atonement will be counted to us!"

And with these words, bowing respectfully, the abbé left the room.

The other words contained in this infernal letter, were as follows:

You, more than any one, madam, should compassionate my calamity, or rather that of my child; for you are the natural daughter of Madame de Richeville. I will give you proofs if you relieve me. Be so kind as to send whatever succour you may think fit to give me, by an order on the post-office at Paris, to be left till called for; Madame Jenny Pierron, mother of Mademoiselle Albin, who knows the secret of your birth.

Was this letter really written by the person designated, or was it not a new and accursed machination of Lugarto? This was a point which at that moment, neither I nor Madame de Richeville could unravel.

When I recovered time for recollection, I thought that, after the exclamation of Emma, I ought to have prevented Madame de Richeville from the irrevocable admission, by declaring that the letter was a lie! But the suspicion, once awakened in the mind of Emma, could never have been lulled again, and the doubt would have been probably as painful as the certainty.

The nearer I draw to the close of these sad memoranda, the darker do events become.

I sometimes feel as if my courage would fail me.

All that remains for me to relate is so recent, that I have no longer the strength to dwell upon the facts as I have done when they related to times long past. I have never shrunk from inquiring closely into my own sorrows; I sought—I found in that a sort of bitter pleasure. To me, often misunderstood—to me, who never have complained, this narrative has been as an outburst of tears long and with pain suppressed.

But when I have to paint the bitter anguish of those whom I love so dearly, my heart throbs with reluctance, my pen trembles in my hand, unwilling to proceed.

The day which succeeded to this cruel scene, Emma said these words to me—which pointed out to me the terrible position in which she must thenceforth, and for ever, stand with Madame de Richeville.

"Never shall I forgive myself for speaking of my mother, as I did, before her very face."

Madame de Richeville, too, while talking with me of her fears respecting Emma's discovery of the secret of her birth, had often said:

"Life would be horrible to me, from the moment when I should have to blush in Emma's presence."

Now only conceive the state of that wretched mother's mind, when chance had brought about the conversation in which her crime had found so energetical a condemnation in the presence, ay! and from the very lips of her own daughter!

Conceive, too, the remorse of Emma, who now reproached herself incessantly as the accuser of her mother; conceive the constant struggle between her attachmeut to Madame de Richeville, and the inexorable severity of the principles which she had herself instilled into that daughter's bosom.

Doubtless, in the end, the love of Emma for her mother would have won the day; but the poor child was never destined to find consolation for the bitter words she had addressed involuntarily to her mother.

Alas! I received the confidence of those two high souls both wounded unto death.

Emma would say to me at one time—"My mother's goodness cuts me to the very soul! the very manner, too, in which she insists on it that she retains no recollection of that fatal conversation, proves to me that she never ceases to bear it in mind. I have dealt her heart a wound which must be incurable."

In her turn, Madame de Richeville would say, "Emma does everthing in the world to convince me, that she does not despise me; but the character of her mind is too elevated, the influence of her education is too firmly stamped, to allow her—in spite even of her love, her kind devotion for me—to forget the inexorable, yet too great condemnation which she poured out upon my conduct; to forget the indignant eloquence with which the Abbé Dampierre so righteously pronounced judgment on all like me!"

All reasonings were useless to reassure these two unhappy beings, the very keenness of whose feelings were but the consequences of the exceeding delicacy of their organization. What restraint, now—what distrust, what sadness, what involuntary, coldness arising from those after-thoughts, were now cast over their relations, so calm and soothing heretofore.

How many times were the silent scornful regrets of the one or other of these two victims to atrocious villany, misconstrued mutually into tacit reproaches. Alas! when countenances have once contracted an habitual gloom, who can detect the cause which overclouds them?

Under these circumstances, so difficult and painful, I had full opportunity to appreciate the strength of M. de Rochegune's character, and the goodness of his heart. In his high reason, and clear, calm intellect, he found inexhaustible resources to alleviate and undeceive these startling and unquiet doubts.

His tenderness and attention to Emma were redoubled, when he saw her under the influence of these cruel pre-occupations. By dint of eloquence and perseverance, he contrived at last to render less torturing the consequences of that fatal blow, by repeating to Emma and Madame de Richeville, the very arguments which he had used on the night of the discovery.

"The proof, madam, of the fact that the expiation of certain faults, however great, may yet be complete, is this: that I, whose principles no one can call in question—that I, who hold the religion of honour as sacred as any man alive—that I, who carry the observance of all duties even to the extreme of scruples—that I, I say, asked eagerly, and received with pride and happiness, the hand of Emma, whom I knew to be your daughter. As regards, then, your own happiness and that of your daughter—as regards, then, the opinion of the world—you have no more reason to regret her birth, than she has to reproach you with it. For the rest, the inflexible Abbé Dampierre, himself has told you, that the mercy of the Lord is infinite; and that, in the day of judgment, he will keep count of all our atonements."

Autumn was drawing nigh. The weather was extremely cold and rainy. My health was not re-established;—on the contrary, I had experienced a slight relapse. I could not endure, however, to leave my friends at this moment, notwithstanding the pressing, and I might almost say imperative, advice of Dr. Gerard, who took the kindest interest in my welfare.

Seeing that his advice was not followed, he wrote to Madame de Richeville, that my health could never be restored; and that my chest would, in all likelihood, be formidably attacked, if I would not go to pass the autumn and winter in the South.

I was compelled, at length, to yield to the urgency of my friends. Emma and her husband proposed to reside for a few months at Rochegune. Madame de Richeville was about to return to Paris;—for, despite herself—despite all the reasonings of M. de Rochegune—despite all the assurances of Emma, that unhappy mother continually suffered in the presence of her daughter—in the same way that Emma could not overcome her secret dread of having wounded the heart of her mother.

The duchess said, as she bade me farewell, "I knew it not, Matilda; but the justice of Heaven could not be satisfied; it was necessary that it should smite me with a grievous punishment. Could there be one more terrible—more truly providential? Can any one conceive a position more agonizing than that of a mother inexorably judged and condemned, before her own daughter, by the voice of an aged and venerable priest?—of a mother who hears her own child repeat the same just denunciation? Oh! that the vengeance of heaven may be satisfied with what I have suffered—with what I shall suffer until the end of my life! and that it may not reserve for me another blow, more fatal than all that have gone before it!"

Alas! I understood her; and, alas! again, that her sad presentiments did not deceive her!

My friends left me; the last I embraced was Emma. Alas! it was for the last time! Never was I to see her more—ah! never—never!

I set forth for Hyeres with Blondeau and a single footman. I took up my residence in that village, in the beginning of October, and it was about that time that I received the following letter from M. de Lancry;—it was post-marked "Cadiz."

"I hear that you are still in delicate health. Make haste, I beg of you; make haste to get well. I will come and fetch you, as soon as you are strong enough to travel. You do not know what a surprise I am planning for you. Your illness suddenly changed all my plans, a year ago; but you shall lose nothing by waiting. I naturally am very anxious about all that interests you. I am regularly informed of all your proceedings. I know that you are at Hyéres, or will be there very shortly. Perhaps I will come thither to rejoin you.

"*My travelling companion* desires me to give you a thousand remembrances from him, and to ask you—whether a letter was not received at Maran, at the Duchess de Richeville's house, (not to say at your house, for I now know that the duchess holds only in your name,) whether I say a letter was not received at Maran, from Paris, on the 12th of August—on the 12th of August, St. Clara's day. Happy patroness of the lovely repentant duchess!

"In that letter, addressed to the Marchioness de Rochegune, *a poor* *woman* asked charity in behalf of her natural child——*My travelling companion*, who is everywhere at one time, and who *knows that poor woman*, advised her to write on that day, thinking that St. Clara's day would probably be *kept* a little; and that the request for succour arriving at that time and perhaps in the middle of a very numerous and very pious company—would be all the better received, and create all the more effect by the disclosure at the end of it; it was a chance the more, at least.

"*My travelling companion* also begs to know—whether the curate of Maran was not present at the reading of the letter in question; which, by an oversight, was not given to the little Marchioness de Rochegune until after dinner.

"We ask you these questions—which we could answer just as well ourselves—to show you, that we are perfectly well aware of everything you do; and that we have as much a regular train of operations, as an obstinate determination of following them up.

"We lead here lives like that of Sardanapalus. You—you alone—you we miss terribly; so that I sigh ardently for the day when I shall again see you, lovely, and young, and in perfectly re-established health. While I await that happy moment, I try to banish my regrets."

What I had suspected was then true. The discovery of Emma's birth, and the pretended prayer for aid, was but a new villainy of M. Lugarto. It was no longer to be doubted; nor that, in order to be so well informed as he was, this man must have had some creature of his own, either about me, or the Duchess de Richeville, or M. de Rochegune.

I passed the winter alone, and very sadly—receiving from time to time, letters from Madame de Richeville or M. de Rochegune. The latter did not attempt to conceal from me, that the effect of the sudden blow which had struck Emma, still continued; but that he hoped, by strict care, to bring about her complete restoration.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE CASKET.

The spring of 1838 arrived. I had been above six weeks, without receiving news from my friends; and I was beginning to grow seriously uneasy, when M. de Rochegune wrote me these words:

"Emma is dead!—I am her murderer!—these were her last words: '*You loved Matilda—you married me from pity only—my happiness I owe to her!*' It is not regret, which shall endure for a whole life, that she has left to me. It is remorse! horrible remorse! that she has left to me. Yes! I am her murderer! Yes! I cannot have shown her all the affection she deserved. Yes! I must have suffered her to penetrate my thoughts. One day or other, she must have suspected my love for you! Must have imagined, unhappy child, that my marriage with her did not suffice to my happiness—that idea must have killed her! It is beyond a doubt. The grief which the disclosure of her birth had caused her, was passing rapidly away. I could perceive her gradual recovery. Suddenly, a frightful relapse occurred! In one month that angel was taken from me! My mind is gone! I am mad with anguish and despair!"

You can imagine the poignant and terrific shock which I felt, as I read these words.

I could not explain to myself, how Emma could have discovered M. de Rochegune's love for me—still less, how she could have imagined that he had married her from pity only—or how he should accuse himself of her death. This mystery, too, will one day be revealed to me.

I left Hyeres, reached Paris, and flew to the house of Madame de Richeville. I expected to find her mourning disconsolately, I found her firm, submissive, piously self-resigned. She had accepted that sad loss, as a merited chastisement, inflicted on her from above. She said to me, with a coolness more terrible to me than the convulsions of despair, "God is just! he has smitten me through my child, the living proof of my crime!"

She was as pale as marble; and by one of those phenomena, which not unfrequently happen in moments of great anguish, her hair had turned white in a single month. She had made her final arrangements to retire to the

Sacré Cœur, and there await in penitence the end of her days. She would positively see no one, but the Princess d'Hericourt and myself.

M. de Rochegune had departed a few days after the death of Emma; and no one knew whither he had gone. Madame de Richeville insisted on attributing the death of her child to the frightful shock, which the discovery of the secret of her birth had brought upon her. From that time forth, she told me she had altered singularly. Her health, though greatly shaken, had, she admitted, for a time, improved—when, about a month before her death, she had been suddenly seized by violent convulsions, and an increase of melancholy, which no one knew to what cause to attribute it. From that time her life had appeared to be but one slow and protracted agony; and when she died, it seemed to be a release.

During this mournful narrative, Madame de Richeville never said a word to me, that should lead me to suspect that Emma had discovered her husband's love to me, or that she knew he had married her only from pity. About a month after this sad event, Madame de Richeville retired to the *Sacré Cœur*, after having employed all that remained to her of her fortune, in religious foundations, with the exception of a moderate annuity, which she paid for her maintenance, to the ladies of the convent.

Thanks to the air of the South, my health was now completely re-established, and I determined that I would not again quit Paris, or leave Madame de Richeville utterly alone, during the commencement of her sojourn in the sad retreat, to which she had devoted the remainder of her days.

She was much pleased at the resolution I had taken, of remaining some time with her; and to save me the annoyance of making a new establishment, proposed to me to occupy her house, the use of which still belonged to her for a year. I shall explain why I enter into these details.

I accepted this offer. Her men of business had retained sufficient powers to enable them to complete the last disposition of her fortunes. M. Gaston de Senneville had some joint interests, with her, in the succession to some unclaimed property; and having obligingly offered her his services in certain transactions, he had to represent her in several family councils; and Madame de Richeville feeling incompetent to attend to business, accepted his offer. Being, however, determined to see and receive no person but myself and Monsieur and Madame d'Hericourt, she urgently requested me to act between herself and M. de Senneville, when he should have instructions to ask, or signatures to obtain.

On this account, I received M. de Senneville sometimes in the morning. He still kept charge of the letters which I had intrusted to him; and two or three times I sent Blondeau, to add some letters to those already in the casket, the key of which, I sent by her each time; now fearing, more than ever, the villainies of Lugarto. About the month of December, M. de Rochegune wrote me word, that after travelling for a considerable time, in the hope of deadening his feelings, he had returned to Paris; but that he lacked the courage to see Madame de Richeville or myself. He had rented a solitary house in the Marais, under a fictitious name, in order to be completely unsuspected. But he sent me his address, in case either I or Madame de Richeville, should absolutely require his assistance.

I so much respected his solitude and his grief, that I would not even answer his letter—but I soon learned from Madame de Richeville, that he had obtained special permission to enter the cemetery of Pere la Chaise at night, wherein the remains of Emma had been lodged, in the family vault of de Rochegune.

I sometimes sent Blondeau, to make inquiries as to the health of M. de Rochegune, from Stok, his confidential servant. His despair still bore the same unaltered character. Once only had he left the house by day, and then in order to keep an old and perpetual engagement, entered into with the officers, who, like himself, had fought for the Independence of Greece, at the head of the troops they commanded. Thither he went, according to agreement, in full uniform, to that solemn meeting, where he had informed the guests that he had arrived directly from his estates, and was returning to them forthwith.

One of the last days of the year, I went to see Madame de Richeville, and was sorry to find her even sadder than usual.

"I am," she said, "the cause of an unworthy calumny. My nephew, Gaston, is a wretch whom I will never see again so long as I live. Yesterday, the Princess d'Hericourt came to see me. She learned by chance that M. de Senneville is giving an infamous meaning to the interviews you have been so kind as to grant him on my business. He pretends that the retired life you have led for some time past, was consecrated entirely to him, and that he went and lived with you in the South. He dares to affirm, that Madame Blondeau carries to him your letters, and receives his in return; and pretends even that he has shown her to his friends, who, he affirms, have seen her time after time come to him from you. He adds, moreover, that on your account he hesitates about concluding a very excellent marriage, which is proposed to him."

It was unnecessary that I should tell Madame de Richeville, that I had not even heard of M. de Senneville during my abode at Hyères; but I explained to her a part of the reasons which had formerly obliged me to intrust a deposit of some importance to the charge of M. de Senneville, and how Blondeau had been in the habit of going sometimes to his house.

As I, and even more than I, the duchess was indignant at this ignoble breach of confidence. My part was soon decided. I sent Blondeau the next morning to the house of M. de Senneville, with orders to bring back my casket. If M. de Senneville, was not at home, she was to request his confidential valet to give it to her. The man, who knew her perfectly, made no difficulty about it, but gave it to her.

I got into my carriage with Blondeau, to carry the casket myself to M. de Rochegune; considering—though unhappily too late—that I had nothing now to fear, even should chance reveal to him the contents of the letters. While on the way, I reflected that M. de Rochegune wishing to keep his residence a secret, it would be more prudent to go to him in a hackney-coach. Lest the indiscretion of my servants, who might recognize Stok, should give him any uneasiness, I took a hackney-coach, and sent away my own carriage;—we reached the *Marais.*

I thought it would give me a sad sort of pleasure, even to see the house in which M. de Rochegune lived. We left the hackney-coach at the corner of the *rue St. Louis*, and I walked with Blondeau, who carried the casket to Stok. While she was discharging this commission, I examined, anxiously, the exterior of that gloomy dwelling—its deserted air of desolation shocked me. I was appalled to think of the hours of despair which must pass so tediously with him in that deserted house.

Blondeau delivered the casket to Stok, brought me some news of M. de Rochegune, and we returned home. I went to make my adieu to Madame de Richeville. Notwithstanding the grief which our separation caused us, she had advised me, and I had determined to put an end—by going that very morning to Maran—to the odious reports which the miserable folly of M. de Senneville had produced.

Some days after my arrival, Madame de Richeville informed me of events, the consequences of which might have been very serious to me. This is a passage extracted from her letter:

"My nephew Gaston has been in so great danger, that, despite my indignation, I could not refuse to go and see him, as he informed me he had a very important confession to make to me. I found him in great suffering, having been run through the body by M. de Rochegune, the effects of which wound he will probably feel all his life. He confessed to me frankly, that yielding to a wretched sentiment of vanity and pride, he had shamefully abused your confidential matters of business with him, in order to destroy your reputation; and that his visit to you at the South, was a falsehood like all the rest.

"He entreated me, in case his wound should be mortal, to ask your pardon in his behalf; saying, that he had perceived and repented of the cowardice of his falsehoods. And he tried to make out some title to your indulgence, in the absolute discretion he has maintained concerning M. de Rochegune. This is nearly the account he gave me of a scene, which might have had consequences yet more fatal:

"'I learned,' said Gaston to me, 'when I returned to my own house, that my valet de chambre had given up to Madame Blondeau, the deposit which her mistress had intrusted to me. I was mortified, nay, deeply wounded at this procedure. I hurried to Madame de Lancry's—she had just gone out—I was returning to my own house, when I saw her by mere chance, get out of her own carriage with Madame Blondeau, and get into a hackney-coach. This appearance of mystery, struck me with curiosity; and I was going to follow it, when I met M. de Baudricourt, a friend of mine, who has returned very lately from the United States, where he has been remaining for some time. Like many other persons, he had attached credit to my slanders of Madame de

Lancry—I disguised part of the truth from him, and persuaded him to assist me in recovering the track of Madame de Lancry, which I had lost. Several fantastic accidents, which it is unnecessary to relate to you, gave me the full assurance that the casket had been deposited in the *rue St. Louis*, in the *Marais*, at the house of a certain Colonel Ulric.

" 'I confess to you, that stung by the consciousness of my bad action, vaguely jealous of the unknown person to whom Madame de Lancry had granted the confidence which she had withdrawn from me, and fearing, lastly, to appear in a mean light in the eyes of M. de Baudricourt—who believed the claims I asserted myself to possess over Madame de Lancry—I determined to compel the restitution of the casket from this Colonel Ulric. I obtained an interview with him, by the greatest exertions only. I was accompanied by M. de Baudricort.

" 'Conceive my astonishment, at recognizing M. de Rochegune in the person to whom I was introduced, as Colonel Ulric. My friend had never seen him. I behaved then, as I think a gentleman should. M. de Rochegune knew me perfectly well, but did not appear to recognize me. My first surprise over, I did the same toward him. He gave himself out to be Colonel Ulric—I therefore thought it good taste, to take him as Colonel Ulric. M. de Rochegune refused to give me up the letters, and our conference terminated by an appointment to meet at Vincennes.

" 'Wishing, as much as possible, to humour the mystery with which M. de Rochegune had surrounded himself, I took care to get for my second witness, Major-General Hartman, recently arrived from Vienna. M. de Rochegune had sent for two old soldiers, from a barrack in the neighbourhood, to act as his seconds; thus, both before, and during the duel, he remained Colonel Ulric, in the eyes of all, and his secret was perfectly preserved.' "

"This is what my nephew told me, my dear Matilda, beseeching me to intercede with you in his behalf, and to point out to you, his deep discretion in this matter. Under that consideration, I am obliged to admit, that my nephew Gaston has behaved like a gallant man, neither more nor less. But this in no respect, extenuates the baseness of his conduct toward you. Never while I live, will I again see him. I give you these details, to encourage you; if, by any accident, you should hear this duel mentioned."

I have just finished reading this long narrative of my life, from my marriage, until this day, the 10th of April, 1839.

Now, I am undecided. Shall I send these sad pages to him for whom I have written them? Has the time arrived, in which I may be restored to my right standing in his opinion? Is it the time to confess to him, how much I have loved him? How much I love him still? Is not this confession a crime?

A crime? No. What matters it, whether he knows that I love him? That I never have loved any other? I am certain now, of never becoming unworthy either of myself or of him.

Moreover, I know not what to-morrow may bring forth to me. The day before yesterday, I received a few lines from M. de Lancry, announcing his return immediately. He may compel me to go with him, to quit France for ever. What can I do? I have consulted several lawyers—no means are left to me of escaping from the power of M. de Lancry, if he choose to exert it.

If I should be reduced to this necessity—at least, let the man whom I love—whom I esteem most in the world, know these my secret thoughts. He will know that I have never been unworthy of him—he will know that I have bravely sacrificed myself to the happiness of those whom I loved. Whatever lot attend me, at least, I shall meet the candid judgment of my friends.

Were it not for the ominious presentiments which the threat of M. de Lancry's arrival has called forth in my mind, I should feel most happy, that I have possessed the courage necessary to the achievement of these pages.

The long retrospect which I have taken of my life, has calmed me—has given me, if not pride, at least, confidence in my character and in my energies. I have taken fair account of my struggles—of my sufferings. I have not dissembled the evil I have committed—I have not exaggerated the good I may have done.

This severe analysis, this impartial inquiry into my life, has awakened in me very piercing recollections; but they left a perfect calm in my conscience. This will be my sole consolation, this my sole refuge, if new evils should threaten to overwhelm me.

Such has been my life hitherto.

It will be clearly seen by him who reads thus far, that the detestable foresight of Mademoiselle de Maran, has never failed her. She delegated to Ursula and M. de Lancry, the prosecution of her hatred. All the woes of my life have sprung from one or the other of these two beings.

Had she granted my hand to M. de Rochegune, who requested it—following the advice of M. de Mortagne—Mademoiselle de Maran would have insured the happiness of my life. That marriage was rejected—and my aunt rendered me, as it were, an accomplice in her hatred, by inducing me to urge my marriage with M. de Lancry.

END OF THE MEMOIRS OF MATILDA.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE CAFE LEBŒUF.

ABOUT a month had passed, since Madame Blondeau had brought the memoirs of Matilda to Colonel Ulric, to whom we shall henceforth restore his proper title, of M. de Rochegune.

The cafe Lebœuf still presented, as usual, its bottles of preserved cherries, and its bowls of silver plate, to the admiration of the passers-by, through its windows. The hotel d'Orbesson still looked as solitary as ever. Its sole inhabitant, successfully styled *Robin of the Woods, and the Vampire*, by the brothers Godet, had not yet passed the threshold of its doors, at least by daylight. From time to time, the repulsive face of Stok showed itself at the wicket-door. All the windows of the dwelling-house remained continually closed. Madame Lebœuf, the brothers Godet, and the other frequenters of the *café*, had ended by concluding a truce with the *unknown enemy*, as they now called him: that is to say, they had abandoned their system of espial, a sacrifice so much the more meritorious, because nothing new had transpired since the visit of Madame Blondeau to M. de Rochegune. Every morning, the brothers Godet came punctually, to take their cup of coffee, and augment the respectable circle collected around the counter of Madame Lebœuf. On the 13th of May, 1839—a fine spring morning—the two brothers, contrary to their usual custom, arrived at the café two hours later than the others. This serious alteration in their habit, had been caused by a polite invitation, on the part of Madame Lebœuf; who, within the last few days, had given them notice of a *dejeuner dinatoire*,* which, from time to time, she was wont to offer, as a stroke of policy, to her habitual guests.

Prepared for this gastronomical solemnity, by a long walk in the *Jardin des Plantes*, the brothers Godet arrived at the café Lebœuf, admirably disposed to do large honour to this treat of the hostess. At the distance of a few steps from *the establishment*, M. Godet the elder, halted—put his umbrella under his arm, raised his hat, wiped his forehead, and, with his powerful bass voice, said to his brother, in an imposing manner: "I will not conceal from you, Theodore—the fine fresh air, this walk, the glorious weather, the spectacle of nature from the four corners of the world, which I have just ceased to contemplate in the *Jardin des Plantes*, comprising their animals, from the fowls of the air down to the most venomous reptiles—all this has given to me almost wolfish appetite."

"I am not surprised at that, my brother," replied M. Godet, the younger, timidly; "we rose early, and, as the romance says, *while men where yet virtuous, they loved to see the dawn.*"

At this moment, the two brothers were passing by the great door of the hotel d'Orbesson. Godet the elder, cast a sarcastic glance at that side, and said to his brother, with an expression of blood-thirsty irony: "If virtuous persons love to look upon the dawn, sure am I that he who dwells in that house, has rarely looked upon it breaking—the fair dawn."

The phrase was cutting. Theodore caught its import, and said softly to his brother: "Be on thy guard, Godet, sometimes stone walls have ears."

"If walls have ears, France has her laws!" exclaimed Godet the elder, in a voice of thunder, addressing, with fierce emphasis, the great gate of the hotel d'Orbesson, and casting at it a glance of passionate defiance. "Yes," he continued, "France has laws! a constitutional government, and a municipal guard, which protect peaceable citizens, and watch, with an open and paternal eye, over the individuals who lurk sullenly in darkness, to plot—what, I know not—but that he is a plotter, I am certain—a dark plotter!"

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* *Dejeuner dinatoire*, a late breakfast, after the manner of a dinner, consisting of hot-made dishes, sauces, wines, &c

"Godet—Godet—calm thyself, I conjure thee," said Theodore, terrified by the audacity of his brother.

"Let him, if he choose—let him, I say, cause me to be massacred by his bravos," said Godet the elder: "but let him feign the dead man, as long as he pleases—I will maintain him to be a plotter!"

After this energetical and valiant protestation, the two brothers entered the *café* of Madame Lebœuf. Here commenced a series of surprises the most appalling to them, that can be conceived. First, instead of the ingenuous Boitard, that admirable fisher of spiders in decanters, they saw a great lean man, with black beard and hair, and a most sinister visage, who asked them, with a hoarse voice: "What shall I help you to?"

Godet the elder, looked at his brother in surprise; then recollecting himself, and supposing that Boitard was naturally engaged in the preparations for the banquet, he replied, with a patronizing voice and manner: "My good friend, we have come to the breakfast."

"What breakfast?"

Godet the elder, feeling himself on his own ground, instead of replying to this absurd question, asked: "Where is the dear Madame Lebœuf?"

"Who's that—Madame Lebœuf?"

"He is an absolute savage," said Godet, the elder, to Theodore; and, without answering a word more, he turned toward the back shop, wherein the breakfast was to be served.

The substitute of Boitard seized the peaceable lottery-clerk violently by the arm, and said to him—

"Whither are you going then, that way? You cannot pass."

Godet the elder turned crimson——but restraining his rage, he replied, in a tone of majestic contempt—

"My good friend, your play is *horse-play*, real horse-play! but you are a new hand here: you don't know that, if I were to say one word to Madame Lebœuf——"

"Ah! ten thousand thunderbolts! there is no Madame Lebœuf about the place. Sit down here, and you will be served with what there is; but you won't go in there."

M. Godet had again self-command to controul his indignation, and he replied, with a voice which he tried to render calm—

"Once, and for the last time, I state to you, that I am one of the members of the breakfast party which is in preparation there within; and I charge you—yes, I charge you distinctly and aloud—immediately summon your mistress."

"Look here, my jolly fellow! if you were not an old fellow, this would just get you sewed up with kicks in the belly," said the brutal individual, turning his back upon M. Godet, the elder.

He, notwithstanding the supplications of his brother, could now contain himself no longer.

"It costs me very dear—it tortures me, to debase myself so far as to commit myself with a hireling; but I cannot resist the desire of informing you that you are an insolent scamp—that you ought to be the king of scamps!"

The waiter turned upon them so sharply, and with a gesture so threatening, that the two Godets give back a step, simultaneously; but they, nevertheless, kept a defensive attitude, presenting their umbrella at their adversary, as a soldier brings his bayonet to the charge. Notwithstanding this movement, the waiter still advanced, threateningly.

"Do you wish me to make a hassoc of you, to kneel on?" said the wretch, making an offensive allusion to the complete nudity of the elder Godet's bald scalp.

"Insolent malefactor! is their nothing sacred in your eyes?" cried M. Godet, giving back a step again. At this noise, a new personage came upon the scene—a middle-aged man, short and thick-set, bearded, red-faced, wearing a round jacket, and a cap of otter skin.

"What is the matter now, John?" said he to the waiter.

"M. Saunier, here are two nice customers, who insist on going in there by force; they swear they belong to a breakfast party, and are asking for a Madame Lebœuf; they must have been drinking."

"There is no one drunk here but yourself, rude person," said the elder Godet, slightly reassured by the presence of M. Saunier.

But M. Saunier said, almost as roughly as the waiter—

"Madame Lebœuf is no longer here. She has sold out to me. I don't give a breakfast."

Had any one announced to M. Godet the actual resurrection of Napoleon, it would not so have thunderstricken him, as did the news of the sudden retreat of Madame Lebœuf.

"But, Monsieur," he exclaimed, "this is entirely inadmissible—this falls into the fabulous. I must have the honour to inform you that yesterday evening, at three-quarters of an hour after eight o'clock, Madame Lebœ again reiterated to me the invitation which she had given me for——"

"I tell you that Madame Lebœuf gave up to me her interest in this her moveables, her baggage—in short, everything except her gow caps, of which neither John nor I could make any use: and that evening, she took herself off, at ten o'clock."

"It is, nevertheless, quite as extraordinary, monsieur, that, coming n very much inclined for breakfast, we——"

"To what will you be helped? I have no time to gossip. John, wait upon these gentlemen."

And, with these words, M. Saunier entered the back shop, of which he shut the door, carefully.

"Well, help us to whatever you please—some milk, a *bavaroise*[*]—I don't care what," said M. Godet the elder, with a bewildered air, letting himself fall upon a bench, and raising his hands to heaven.

"There is no *bavaroise*," said John.

"How! is it possible? no bavaroise! so, so: well, give us coffee with hot milk," said Godet, with a deep sigh.

"There is no coffee with hot milk, either."

"What?"

"There is nothing but chocolate in cakes, coffee in grains, brandy cherries, and sugared water!"

"But this is alarming—dreadful! People don't open coffee-houses when they can only offer to *consumers* such provender as this!" cried Godet the elder.

"Thunder of Heaven! don't *consume*, then! What difference does it make to us, whether we consume, or no?"

These last words appeared to make a lively impression on the elder Godet; he cast a glance of keen intelligence on his brother, and said to John:

"Well, give us a cake of chocolate, a glass of sugared water, and some bread."

Evidently John was an absolute stranger to the first principles of his profession. He brought the sugar in a cup, the chocolate in a bit of old newspaper, and the water in a bottle. At the sight of these enormities, the Godets exchanged glances of astonishment—almost of terror.

A few faithful and habitual guests, invited like the brothers, to the breakfast of Madame Lebœuf, soon learned from them the sudden disappearance of the hostess, and who were the *savages*—that was the expression of M. Godet the elder—who had taken the place of the widow, always so attentive to her customers, and of her faithful and inoffensive Boitard.

The Messrs. Godet, and the friends, while munching their cakes of chocolate, abandoned themselves to the most fabulous suppositions, touching the disappearance of the widow, and the apparition of her strange successors. Some leaned to the idea of an abduction, perpetrated by an Englishman, or an American. As Theodore sagely observed, that the age and personal appearance of Madame Lebœuf, would seem to give the lie direct to this supposition; an ex-reporter of the Ambigu, profoundedly versed in the deepest mysteries of the human heart, thought himself bound to observe, that neither the age, nor the personal appearance of Madame Lebœuf could be considered obstacles to her abduction; since it was a known fact, that many most amazingly rich *milords* carried their tastes to the most lamentable pitch of depravity. Little flattering as was this conclusion to Madame Lebœuf, it brought over a considerable majority; but conjectures even failed when they began to ask—who could be the successor of the worthy widow? Every thing in their conduct seemed mysterious. In the first place, they seemed to care little about their *consumers.* Why then keep a coffee-house?"

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[*] A *Bavaroise* is tea, sweetened with syrup of capilaire, instead of sugar.

John the Brutal, constantly looked out into the street, and his eyes were never turned from the two doors of the vampire's house. The old servant Stok opened the wicket to the caterer; John instantly left the door, went to find his master, brought him, and pointing to Stok—

"He is there still, notwithstanding———"

"His soul, then, must be rivetted to his body!" answered Saunier.

The wicket-gate closed, and Stok disappeared. A few hours later, a very ill-looking man came hastily into the café, and said to John:

"Attention! I am but a minute or two a-head of her. *He* was right when he said she would come!"

"I believe you; the mousetrap is excellently well set," said John. "Simon is at the little gate in the alley—they cannot escape us."

The two speakers, and the customers, who had not lost a word of this conversation, gazed earnestly through the windows.

"Theodore! Theodore!" cried Godet, the elder: "quick! quick! it is the same old woman who brought the casket to the vampire about four months ago, and a month since, a letter doubtless. How frightened she looks!"

It was indeed Madame Blondeau—pale and trembling with agitation.

She rang, and was received by the faithful Stok, and admitted into the interior of the hotel d'Orbesson.

"Good!" said the companion of John. "What o'clock?"

John pulled out his watch. "She went in there at twenty minutes after twelve."

"Enough," said the man. "I return to the hotel Meurice, where *they* alighted this morning at *ten:*" and he left the café.

John hurried precipitately into the back shop.

When the fierce curiosity of the guests of the café Lebœuf is considered—when it is remembered, that for several months this curiosity had been kept alive only on the most meagre diet, it will be readily understood by how raging a fever the Godets and their company were attacked, when the mysterious intrigue, which they fancied at an end, broke out again; renewed and complicated, more by the strange interest apparently taken in it by the new possessors of the café Lebœuf.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE HOTEL DE MARAN.

While the new proprietors and the ancient guests of the café Lebœuf, kept their eyes rivetted on the doors of the house inhabited by M. de Rochegune, we will conduct the reader to the hotel de Maran, wherein still dwelt the aunt of M. de Lancry.

Night was drawing near. A table abundantly and magnificently covered, was laid for dinner, in a large servant's room, exceedingly well lighted, immediately adjoining the great dining-room.

Servien, the *maitre d'hotel,* presided at the dinner table; two lady's maids, two footmen, the cook, and two or three of their acquaintances, were feasting at the expense of Mademoiselle de Maran, who had been for several months confined to her bed by paralysis, which merely allowed her to move her left arm. As it has been already stated in the memoirs of Madame de Lancry, Mademoiselle de Maran, hated by every one, and deserted by all the world, was abandoned entirely to the mercy of her servants.

"To your good health, Monsieur Servien," said the cook; "all honour to all lords! You are the oldest of us all in the house—you are."

The man with the birth-stain, rose and said, with a singularly ironical air:

"To the health of our *good mistress,* may she live long, just as she is, to make us happy!"

His toast was received with bursts of laughter by all the guests.

"By-the-by! that puts me in mind," said the cook, "that I forgot her tapioca soup—ah! but," he added, "she must eat turtle soup—that will do just as well—and it will be a change for her. There is some left in the tureen."

At this moment a bell rang violently in the room—but no one stirred.

"Good! she is just beginning her chimes to be answered instantly—that will amuse us;" said Mademoiselle Julie, first lady's maid to Mademoiselle Maran.

The bell rang a second time.

"This is intolerable; I thought she had been quieted," said Mademoiselle Julie; "we cannot dine in peace. This is not very amiable of you Monsieur Servien; you promised us to break the wires once for all, so that we could have a little peace—but you never think of it."

"The fact is," said the cook, "that she is become a *ringer*—a finish *ringer*—as good a *ringer* as the best of them."

Three or four violent peals of the bell, seemed to confirm this assertion of the cook.

"Positively there is nothing else left for it," said Servien. "You are right, Mademoiselle Julie; we must break the wires, and then we shall have some rest."

"We can leave her a little hand-bell to amuse herself with," said Mademoiselle Julie; "the doors well closed, we shall not hear it."

"Yes; but madam will send for a locksmith," said a footman, who wanted to be thought clever; "he will soon mend the wires, and then——"

"Upon my word! you have not rid of *our village* yet, M. Goujon," said Mademoiselle Julie. "I wonder who will hear her? with her locksmith! She will order some one to go, perhaps you will say? Well! no one will go—and we will tell her——"

"We will tell her that there is an epidemic which has carried off all the locksmiths," said M. Servien.

This sally made the guests laugh to such a degree, that the peals of Mademoiselle de Maran's bell, which had gone up in a *crescendo furioso*, were completely smothered for some moments; but when the mirth had abated somewhat, a dull chiming was heard, again audible amid the din.

"There is no way of enduring this," said Mademoiselle Julie.

"Oh! she is a ringer—a capital ringer she is!" said the cook.

"It is now that she is gnashing her teeth prettily, and wriggling about in her bed for rage, like a demoniac," said Goujon.

"Yes; wriggling indeed," said Servien—"I defy her to wriggle—she cannot even stir in her bed. It is her left hand only that she can wag."

"Well! she makes up for it bravely with her left hand," said the cook. "Listen! listen! do you hear her bacchanalian fits? Well! well! I stick to what I said, she is a rare ringer."

"Yes; but it is enough to drive one mad," said Mademoiselle Julie. "Oh! now that I think of it, just take the library steps; the bell wire passes through here, we can cut it, and then we shall be quiet."

The guests applauded this brilliant idea of the lady's maid all the more, because the ringing of Mademoiselle de Maran became convulsive, incessant, and interrupted only by short intervals of repose, which Mademoiselle Julie, who figured herself a little on her musical talents, called the *stops of the organ*.

Goujon brought the ladder; Servien intrusted to him a pair of pincers for opening champagne bottles; the wire was cut in the midst of a formidable jingling, and the noise stopped suddenly.

"Heavens! what a figure she must cut in her hat of Carmelite silk," said Mademoiselle Julie, roaring with laughter. "I would not be near her just now for something—she would bite me, surely!"

"And that is a bite that would be venomous," said the cook.

"But why is it that Madam *persists* in wearing a silk hat, and a puce gown in bed, since it is more than two months that she has not risen at all?" asked Goujon.

"It is a vow she has made to the devil," said M. Servien, with a serio-comic air.

"The fact is, that if the devil is her godfather, she is assuredly his godchild," said Mademoiselle Julie. "Malicious, I fancy she is malicious! She never tormented us, when she was well. Oh, no! not in the least! She never played the skin-flint with us. Oh, no! nor treated us like brutes! Oh! not at all. Well! it is our turn now!"

"What makes her furious," added M. Servien, "is it that she cannot write to Monsieur Luchet, her man of business, that great fat snob, to whom she was always complaining of us? She may well order me to write for him to come. No such fool as that am I!"

"Daddy Fabré, the porter, sent him about his business eight days ago," said Goujon.

"I had given him a hint to do so, in case he should come of his own accord, this M. Luchet, confounded intriguer that he is. You must perceive, my children, that madam is quite capable of having him installed here permanently. All then would be up with us; instead of sitting here comfortably in the offices of the dining-room, with a capital dinner of two courses, we should have to go down to the kitchen offices. We should not have half the pleasures we enjoy."

"Tell me now, M. Servien," said Mademoiselle Julie, "why should we not tell her the same thing about M. Luchet, as about the locksmith—that he is dead?—that there has been an epidemic which has killed all the men of business too?"

"By Jove! there could be no denial to it; we should be in peace then. And, on the other side, we could tell M. Luchet that madam does not wish to see him any more, and there would be an end to it. If he should write, as I know his handwriting, I would not deliver his letters—and there would be an end of that, too!"

"Yes! but we must take good care of madam's dear friends, who might, perhaps, tell her that there is no truth in these epidemics," said Mademoiselle Julie, with a malicious smile.

"As to that, who comes to visit her?" said M. Goujon. "For the last two months I have been here, no one has come to see her but the old savan, who never combs his hair."

"The Bisson! the breakall!" said Servien; "he is the only one who remains faithful. He has been here at least three times since the house was shut up, and has always been told madam was worse. Ah! what a difference since the time of Madame Ursula—balls! concerts! dinners! How they kept up then! They danced, and sung, and dined so much, that there remained to me out of it all a pretty little farm in Beauce."

"Ah! so much for economy," said Mademoiselle Julie. "But, really, it is enough to break one's heart to think of that poor Madame Ursula."

"If I had to pity any one, I should rather pity Madame la Viscomtesse, madam's niece, whom she tormented so barbarously when she was little," said M. Servien.

"As to that, you would gain a great deal," said Mademoiselle Julie, "by pitying Madame la Viscomtesse. Did you not see how madam disputed with her physician, Dr. Gerard, because he spoke well of Madame de Lancry? Madam abused M. Gerard to such a degree, that he declared he would never enter her doors again."

"And to punish her, instead of going the next day for Dr. Verteuil," said Servien, "I did not go at all. Bah! a physician would have been a bore to us."

"Tell me," said Mademoiselle Julie, "is a physician of any use to a person who is paralytic?"

"It is not a sickness, paralysis," said Goujon. "They don't move—they don't move, that's all. It is the same as being very quiet—very quiet, that's all!"

"To be sure," replied Julie; "and then, it was not worth the trouble of having a physician, on account of the few things that Dr. Gerard used to order. Little bottles with orange flower—little make-believe drugs, just to amuse her."

"The fact is, that for the fifteen days she has been without a physician, she has been just as well as while she had one," said M. Servien. "It may last a long time yet. Hunchbacks always die hard—they are like cats. We shall always have enough to pay our expenses. I have long been in the custom of giving receipts to madam's farmers. I take just enough to prevent us from wanting anything; the rest I put into madam's coffers."

"As to that, we are very well here—very well," said Mademoiselle Julie; "only we ought to take a little boy to wait on us at table, for it is a bore to have to get up every moment."

"That's just it," said the cook; "I would dress the dishes—my kitchen-maid would give the things to the urchin, and then we should dine off hot dishes."

"Adopted!" said Servien. By-the-bye," he continued, "since the death of her last dog, madam is at me every day to buy her another."

"Ah! I will have no more dogs here. I will have no more dogs here. I have been long enough waiting on animals," cried Mademoiselle Julie. "Besides, it was not to have another, that I finished the last."

"So! so! so! it was you, then, who was the cause of his choking?" said Servien.

"Of course, always—the spiteful, cross old beast was a perfect curse."

"Decidedly, then—no dog?" inquired Servien.

"No, no! no dog!" repeated the company, in chorus.

"Adopted! said the *maitre d'hotel.* "I will tell her, they have been carried off by the same epidemic, which has swept off the locksmiths, the men of business, and the physicians."

This witticism made the guests, who were now at their dessert, laugh very heartily.

"Look you, how is this, pray? there is no Cyprus wine—this is a very pretty dessert," said Mademoiselle Julie.

Monsieur Servien looked at the table. "I thought I had taken a bottle from madam's room," he said.

"What a habit it is, to keep her Cyprus wine in the cupboard of her great dressing-table, while all the other wines are in the store-room or the cellar."

"It is a notion she has—don't talk to me about it. It moves my pity," said Servien. Then he rose from his seat, saying, "I will go and get some."

"I say, Monsieur Servien, let us take her soup at the same time—it will be killing two birds with one stone," said Mademoiselle Julie.

"You are right. What o'clock is it?—nine o'clock—she wanted it at half-past eight—only half an hour too late."

The cook carelessly poured the remains of the turtle soup into a china plate. Servien took a napkin, spread it upon a waiter, made Mademoiselle Julie go before him carrying a taper, and crossed the three drawing-rooms, which separated the dining-room from Mademoiselle de Maran's bedchamber.

Night had completely set in.

"Take care, I beg you, Monsieur Servien—take care that she does not devour you, when you go to carry her the soup;" said Mademoiselle Julie, laughing, and opening the door.

The interior of the room was such as it has been described by Madame de Lancry in her memoirs. On the chimney-pieces, Chinese images of green porcelain, with red eyes always in motion—on the old writing desk of Japan-work, three generations of stuffed-dogs—and grave pictures of characters of past ages standing out of the dark wainscoting.

By the feeble light of the taper which Mademoiselle Julie carried, the yellow billious face of Mademoiselle de Maran might be discovered, as she sat in her bed, propped up by a great cushion, at the bottom of an alcove hung with dark crimson damask. She always wore the eternal dress of grey silk; the same mantelet, the same *tour* of false black hair, half-covering her flat forehead, which receded like that of a viper. Her sunken eyes, however, were bright and keen as ever; and at the moment when Servien came in, they were sparkling with unutterable fury.

The position of this woman was the more hideous, that her paralysis only permitted the use of her neck, and her left arm below the elbow. The rest of her body was completely lifeless.

The imprecations which she began to vomit forth against Servien and Mademoiselle Julie, were accompanied only by a feeble swinging of the head, and some convulsive shakings of the left hand.

"Wretch!" she shrieked, foaming with fury. "Frightful scoundrel! Is it my death then, that you wish for!—robber and assassin that you are?"

Servien approached the bed with imperturbable self-possession, to set down the waiter on it.

This silence redoubled the exasperation of Mademoiselle de Maran, who cried out:

"Begone! Get out! I discharge you! Never let me see you again!"

Servien turned on his heel, made a sign to Mademoiselle Julie, and returned to the door.

"But the Cyprus wine?" cried she, in a whisper.

"Never mind; she will call me back."

"Servien! Servien! Julie! Will you not come to me? Oh! wretches! wretches! they have conspired to destroy me by a slow fire!"

Servien wheeled round again, and came back, with the same slow and solemn step, with his waiter.

Mademoiselle perceived the necessity of keeping down her rage.

"What o'clock is it? At what time did I order my tapioca?"

"I waited for Madam to ring," said Servien, placing the waiter on the bed.

"Madam generally rings for light," said Mademoiselle Julie, ingenuously.

Mademoiselle de Maran raised her eyes to heaven, and said, in a smothered voice:

"They will kill me! they will kill me! I shall die of rage! How? Did I not ring?—ring for half an hour, till I had almost broken my arm?"—she shrieked, with an explosion of fury that no words can describe.

"Did madam ring?" asked Servien.

"Madam, perhaps, fancied she rung," said Mademoiselle Julie.

"Fancied I rung! Do you hear the stupid brute? the wretched liar? Fancied I rung; I tell you I rung half an hour, hard enough to break everything—she-devil that you are!"

"That is it," said Servien; "in ringing so violently, madam unquestionably broke the wires, and we heard nothing of it."

"And whose fault is it, that I broke the wire, you animal? Is is not yours? For above half an hour, I have been in the dark; and you know that I have the horrors in the dark. Well! come now, light the candles; instead of standing there, gaping to catch jackdaws, you great stupid she-bittern, that you are!"

Instead of obeying, Mademoiselle Julie took up the corner of her apron, pretending to cry; ran to the door, and disappeared, exclaiming, in a voice interrupted by fits of sobbing—

"I cannot accustom myself to be treated in this manner—hi—hi—hi—"

"Julie! Julie! will you come hither? Ah! the wretch," exclaimed Mademoiselle de Maran; "I will not have her stay a moment longer in the house. I will not have her here! Discharge her! Kick her out of the door! —not to-night, but this instant! Do you hear me, Servien?"

"Yes, madam; but be calm—tranquillize yourself." And, after having placed the waiter on a bed-table which he set before Mademoiselle de Maran, he went to the closet to get a bottle of Cyprus wine. He was closing the cupboard, when he heard a noise as of a plate broken upon the floor, and the voice of Mademoiselle de Maran, in a new fit of fury:

"Servien! Servien!"

"What is it, madam?"

"Tell me—do you wish to poison me? Oh! it is dreadful! What soup is that?"

"What is this? Madam has thrown it into the middle of the room! and the plate too! Here it is, all over the carpet!"

"You give me turtle soup? Turtle soup to a sick woman! You want to kill me, infamous cheat that you are!"

Servien—imagining, probably, that his friends were becoming impatient for him—left the room under the same pretext as Mademoiselle Julie, saying, in a grieved and heartfelt tone of sadness:

"It is a hard thing for an old and faithful servant, to hear himself called such names; it cuts me too deeply, to hear madam speak thus to me. I had rather go away." And he disappeared, closing the door respectfully behind him.

"Servien! Servien! will you come back? Ah! my God! what is that bottle he is carrying away with him? Servien! Oh dear, it is my Cyprus wine. Servien! ah, the infernal thieves! the wretches! I choke with rage!"

She seized the bell-rope, with a painful effort; but soon cast it from her, crying, "It is broken, they will not come. Ah! what shall I do? Alone—alone—no one to deliver me from this scum of the earth. They insult me, they torture me, they plunder me—and I can do nothing. Alone—old—impotent—deserted by every one!

"If I should discharge these, and hire others, it would be still the same. I have no one to support me—no one to take my part. Ah! my God! how wretched I am! At my age, sick, deprived even of the commonest cares! I eat nothing in the world but a little wretched soup, and even that, I cannot get. Oh! my God! my God! that I should be suffering with hunger, in my own house, in the midst of my servants. Oh! it is horrid—horrid Servien—Servien! Nothing! they will not come. Is there no justice then, left upon the earth or in Heaven? Oh! what barbarity is this! Oh! what atrocity! Oh! it is too atrocious! Even the lowest woman of the lowest common people, when she falls sick, has a family to take care of her. But I—no one! no one! I am reduced to the very impotence of rage—to foam at the mouth with fury! and thus it is, day after day! Servien! Servien. It avails not to call—they will not hear me! Oh! the wretches! My God—what shall I do? I will cry help—and fire—yes! yes! perhaps they will then come!"

Mademoiselle de Maran then began to scream with a broken and quavering voice, "Help! fire! fire;"

Her voice, weakened already by her exertions and her rage, did not reach the ears of her people—all continued silent.

The hideous face of Mademoiselle de Maran grew now positively livid with terror—the pale light of the candle was scarcely sufficient to scatter the obscurity which reigned throughout the vast old-fashioned chamber. Like all base and bad conscience-stricken persons, Mademoiselle de Maran was terrified by darkness.

"Help!" she repeated, in a languid tone, "help! fire!"

After a moment of deep silence, she again ejaculated, in absolute despair:

"They do not come—I shall burn—I shall die—they will let me die and burn! Ah! my God! Die! It is terrible to die—to die thus alone—with not a person near you but varlets, who but wait for your last breath, to pillage you! To die! to die! and afterward—afterward! Oh, no! afterward there is nothing—there is nothing!"

At this moment—her eyes, bewildered with terror, were arrested by the portrait of one of her ancestresses, who had once been abbess of the Ursulines, at Blois. This face, pale, and almost sepulchral, and strangely set off by its black wood seemed to start from its frame. Mademoiselle de Maran felt all her fears redoubling. Her solitary position and the sight of the nun, combined to give her for the moment some fleeting fancies of religion, which her odious selfishness soon rendered unavailing.

"My God! have pity on me!"—she exclaimed: "I will become religious—I will pray—I will have an almoner—a confessor—he shall never leave me—he shall take care of me—he shall rid me of these scoundrel servants—he shall defend me—he will be society for me—yes! I will swear it to thee, oh! my God. But how shall I get him—this priest?—who will send for him?—It is in vain to tell these wretches—these villains who disobey my orders. It is a fortnight since I have been asking for the doctor—they strive with each other who shall best disobey me—and to whom shall I complain? who will defend me? I am alone—always alone! I believe it, that every one hates me—who will come, then, to a poor old suffering wretched woman? It was well so long as I gave them fêtes; so long even as I could hurt them: now they fear me no longer—they detest me—they avenge themselves for the injuries I have done them—ah! it is terrible. But—hush!—I hear a noise—a carriage—a carriage stops before my gate—my God! what happiness!—but they will let no one in—they will send it away—no! no! it remains—they have shut the door again! I am saved! If it should be the physician to whom I have so long been waiting—steps—yes!—yes!—I hear steps! It is some one! my God! my God—It is some one!"

In truth, the sound of hurried footsteps did come up to the door, and Madame de Lancry, throwing it violently open, rushed into the room of Mademoiselle de Maran, followed by Servien.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE INTERVIEW.

"MATILDA! it is the good God, who sends you!" cried Mademoiselle de Maran—"come to my help!"

"It is I, madam," answered Madame de Lancry quite exhausted, and running up to her aunt's bed. "It is I, who come to beseech you to save me—my husband will be here directly—save me, for pity save me!"

Servien disappeared.

"Yes! yes! I will save you, my child—but we will never quit each other any more!" cried Mademoiselle de Maran; "you shall see—you shall see—I will be as good to you as I used to be malicious! But you will not abandon your poor old aunt to her executioners—you will not—will you? If I could throw myself upon my knees before you, I would do so—to implore you! Whatever you would have me, I will do—I swear it to you! But do not leave me alone—you know not to how horrible a life I am condemned!"

In spite of her terror, Matilda could not help being struck by these words, and by the accent of despair in which Mademoiselle de Maran uttered them.

"Madam," she replied precipitately, "my moments are precious to me. I come to ask you, what you seem anxious about for yourself? You are my nearest kinswoman; perhaps they will not refuse to let me remain with you."

"Can it indeed be true? My God!" exclaimed Mademoiselle de Maran, overpowered with joy and astonishment. "Do you wish to remain with me?"

"Yes! yes! madam!" exclaimed the miserable woman—"everything, rather than——Oh! it is too horrible!"

Then, she continued, after a moment's pause—

"But, he has the law—he has the strength with him. Oh! I will kill myself rather—yes! I will kill myself rather than follow him!"

"No! no! do not follow him! remain with me, Matilda;—my fortune, all my fortune, belonged to you this long time past. I intended it for you, it is true—very true. But I will give the whole of it up to you now; while I am living—the whole of it, if you will not leave me!"

The terror which had taken possession of Matilda, was so absolute, that she was not shocked at Mademoiselle de Maran's proposal. She dreamed only of escaping from her husband.

"But he may force me to accompany him—as he has done already," she cried.

"No—no—no—he cannot. We will have lawyers, do you see—the best—we will not care what it costs us. We will put in our plea—we will care nothing—nothing—for expenses, so that I keep my sweet niece near me—my beloved child! for you are indeed almost my child—the daughter of my brother, whom I loved so dearly."

"But in one hour, madam, within one hour, perhaps, my husband will be here. The day before yesterday he came to Maran, to seize me; I refused to accompany him—he went to find the mayor, and then I was obliged to accompany M. de Lancry. As soon as we arrived here, at the hotel Meurice, with Blondeau, whom he permitted me to bring with us, he told me to wait—that we should stay but twelve hours in Paris—as long as should be necessary to get our passports in due form, and to obtain the powers which the law gives him. He insists on having in his own hands, the means necessary to compel me, in case I should refuse, to follow him."

"Well, then, my child, you must hide yourself here. He will not know that you have come."

"Every step that I take is watched, madam; he has told me, himself, that I cannot escape from him—that he shall know where to recover me. Nevertheless, the moment he left me, I flew to the Duchess de Richeville, who advised me to come hither, to yield to nothing but force; and when the magistrates come, to implore them to let me remain with you, my nearest kinswoman, until I may be able to prove the infamy of M. de Lancry's conduct toward me."

"She is right! that good—that excellent duchess! She is entirely right—the magistrates can never refuse you that. What! tear a niece from her aunt? No! no! you shall never quit me. How generous that will be of you—how noble! after all the evils that have been done to you—you are so good—you have a mind so noble! And then it is so noble to forgive—and again I am so unhappy. Fancy to yourself, my dear child, that I am the victim of these miserable slaves who surround me. Listen to what a pitch they have carried their cruelties: I had a dog—a poor dog—which loved me; the only creature in the world that did not hate me. In my solitude it was my only joy, my only consolation; with him I was not utterly alone. Well, they had the barbarity to kill him. Yes! I am sure of it. They poisoned him—for since his death, I have ordered them to buy me another, and they have not obeyed me. Is that credible?—it nevertheless is so. Picture to yourself a person here, refusing to obey me—and yet what is it to them, whether I have a dog or no? But to whom could I complain? They do not let a soul come near me. But when you shall be here, they will respect me—you will awe them—you will compel them to obey my commands—you will compel them to respect your poor infirm aunt—will you not?"

"Silence!" said Matilda, suddenly. "A carriage—it is he! it is he!"

"No! no!" said Mademoiselle de Maran; "the carriage passes by: but what would he do to you, this monster?—for he is a monster, do you know? never could you say too much ill of him! Ah! if you knew him as I know him. Ah! now I repent sadly, that I ever consented to your marriage with him; but your head was set upon it, you poor little thing. Ah! it will be the grief of my whole life that I gave you to such a thief—a forger—a robber. Ah! I could cry for it—yes I could cry tears of blood. But what does he want with you now, this wretch? Has he not already squandered your fortune?"

"What does he want, madam? he wants to sell me to M. Lugarto," cried Madame de Lancry, terrified.

"Ah! Matilda, that is abominable!"

"I tell you, that for money, this man is capable of doing anything," cried Matilda: "he is a most infamous wicked man. To satisfy the hatred which that fiend bears—hatred which he himself now partakes, my husband would not recoil from any crime. As he came hither, he made me his confidant in horrible revelations, telling me that no one heard him; that if I spoke of them he would deny them; that no one would believe me. And yet, madam, such is the law which *men* have made, that it will force me to accompany this man, who leads me but to my own dishonor—but to death—for I will kill myself, rather than remain in the power of these two men! If I kill myself, God will take pity on me. But—listen—listen—this time—oh! this time—it is, indeed, a carriage which is stopping here!" cried Matilda, terrified.

"It is, indeed, my child, a carriage which has stopped. But perhaps it may be the physician whom I am waiting for: a most infamous, wicked man; for they have also had the atrocity to refuse to get me the physician for whom I sent them."

"No! no! it is he!—ah! it is he! He must have caused me to be followed; he must have discovered where I was—he told me so! he told me so!"

"My God! there may be something to be done yet. I will send Servien to bring some lawyers immediately. At all events, dear little girl, resist, resist to the last; yield to nothing but force. Ah! if my people were but devoted to me, I would have him thrown out of the window. Wretch! monster that he is! who comes to tear from me my dearest child!"

Matilda was not mistaken; M. de Lancry entered the room of Mademoiselle de Maran. Although he had grown very fat, his figure was still graceful; he was dressed with ultra taste and nicety—almost effeminately. Notwithstanding his fatness, his face was haggard; his eyes were sunken, blinking, and surrounded by dark circles; his face once so full of fresh life, and intellect, and gay good-humour, had now a character of soft purring ferocity. The bloodiest and most effeminate emperors of old Rome must have worn some such an aspect—both sickening and disgusting. His voice, formerly so proud and insolent, had become honeyed; a soft and affected lisp rendered it yet more disgusting.

He advanced to the bed of Mademoiselle de Maran, took her hand and kissed it.

"What charming fortune this day brings together the happy couple whom you united?"

"Let me alone, with your soft flute-like voice, and your affectations," said Mademoiselle de Maran. "you frighten me; you are like a tiger playing the sentimental. Why do you come hither to torment this poor woman? First, I can tell you, she wishes to remain here with me—with her dear aunt—do you understand? I am her father's sister, and you shall not take her away, I promise you!"

"Is it indeed so, my beautiful, well-beloved?" said he, addressing Matilda with an air of mincing coxcombry, both cruel and full of mockery; "you must be very much afraid of me, truly;" and he sat down in an armchair, near the alcove of Mademoiselle de Maran's bed.

"Monsieur, you shall not take me hence living," said Matilda, shuddering.

"You hear her, I hope, vile man! This dear child—it is not I who force her to say, 'You shall not take me hence living;' so go about your business! go about your business! and leave us in peace as we are, together."

"Good heavens!—good heavens!" said M. de Lancry, continuing to mince and give himself all manners of airs; "will you never be reasonable, beautiful angel? Will you never understand that you are mine, my beautiful sweet wife?—that you belong to me, soul and body? What is the use of lessons to you? The day before yesterday, I arrived at Maran; you refused to follow me, my adorable; you obliged me to send for Monsieur, the

Mayor. Well; what came of it?—that excellent public officer, assisted by the police magistrate, proved to you, as clear as day, that you were obliged to accompany me whither I should choose to take you, my sweet love. How can I give up so many charms? You are prettier than ever; you have a complexion the most brilliant, the purest imaginable."

"Ta! ta! ta!" said Mademoiselle de Maran; "your village mayor was a blockhead—an ass! You shall see the value of your fine municipal in wooden shoes! At Paris that will not go so; we will have good advocates—good judges; they will soon bring about a proper representation, and you will leave us alone then."

"Do you think so, best aunt of mine?"

"Certainly; do you suppose that they would abandon an unhappy young woman to the hands of a devil? Come, now—if that were the case, there must needs be no more justice upon earth."

"Upon my word! all this has been looked to," said M. de Lancry, very sweetly; "everything is not roses in this world. I have got just here in my pocket, my good aunt, the wherewithal to set you right. By her flight this morning, my adorable love served me to my very wish. I had foreseen it. As I passed through Paris this morning, I had an interview with the Prefect of Police. Yes, my beautiful well-beloved! once here, you were immediately followed, not only by the people of M. le Prefect, but by others no less skilful; so that it is quite well known, that when you arrived, you sent off your faithful Blondeau to one Colonel Ulric, otherwise called M. de Rochegune. It is known that she arrived there at one o'clock, and remained until a quarter before two. It is known, that when you left the hotel Meurice, where we alighted, my lovely angel went directly to the *Sacrè Cœur*, and thence came hither. Whereupon, I immediately sent orders to the hotel Meurice, that my travelling carriage should be brought hither; for I told you beforehand, my love! we have but twelve hours to remain in Paris. The meantime I employed in procuring the necessary passports, my fair angel! and obtaining an order from M. le President of the Tribunal of first recourse; which order enjoins it on the authorities to lend me aid and assistance, in case my lawful wife should adopt the foolish idea of struggling against the will of her husband—I should not wish to say her master. Do you wish, my adored! to cast your eyes over this paper? Do not tear it—for you will only give me the trouble of getting another."

"Come, come;" cried Mademoiselle de Maran, while Matilda mechanically ran over the deed; "is this possible? You do not know of what she accuses you? This alone would be sufficient to produce a separation; for it is the height of infamy. Yes, she asserts that you are about to carry her off to find again that abominable white negro, Lugarto."

"Truly? the poor little darling! has she guessed that too? Yes, certainly—oh, yes, she is not mistaken. That excellent and devoted friend is waiting for us at Nice—we start this evening. Fritz, whom Matilda knows, is to be our courier. We take no one with us. I shall always be too happy to wait, in person, on my beautiful well-beloved! so she will leave her Madame Blondeau here."

During the last few minutes, Matilda had appeared absolutely indifferent to all that was going on around her. Suddenly, without saying a word, she bowed her head, dropped on her knees, and began to pray fervently.

"You see now!" cried Mademoiselle de Maran; "she is praying to the good God, who is now her sole resource, and He will not abandon her. Do you believe that He will suffer the consummation of such abominable infamy?—that she should again see such a man?"

"I assure you, my most lovely aunt, he is caluminated—my adored will be enabled to judge of him. Once arrived at Nice, we all there start for Sicily—a very wild and very picturesque country, wherein Lugarto proposes to establish himself for a time. While we were living at Naples, we went to visit a sort of Venetian Castle, situated a few leagues distant from Messina, in a delightful solitude, among deep and inaccessible ravines. There we shall live—I, Matilda, and Lugarto; and we shall lead the most delightful life in the world. In that desert place, one is as free from all restraint as at Otaheite—we will get up for ourselves, there, a little private Caprea."

Suddenly, Matilda arose—erect, proud, haughty—her eyes sparkling, her cheeks flushing; and, in a firm, clear voice, she said to Mademoiselle de Maran 'God will not abandon me!—no! I feel it—He will not abandon me, as human justice has done. He has read the truth in my heart—whatever happens, He will pardon me and, whatever happens, also—be thou ac cursed!" she said, in solemn tones, to Mademoiselle de Maran, "be thou accursed! thou, who hast confided to this man the life of thine own brother's daughter—knowing that man to be a monster!"

"Matilda!" exclaimed Mademoiselle de Maran, in a voice of supplication.

"It is the will of God!" exclaimed Madame de Lancry, with increasing fervour, "It is the will of God, that, by a strange chain of events, you have before your eyes, at this hour, the picture of the horrible evil you have done. For you, the day of atonement is commencing. You are abandoned by all—given up to the cruelty of your own servants. Thus shall you die—abandoned by all—accursed by all. Ursula, whom you ruined—Ursula, who, owing to you, passed from crime to crime, until she closed her sad career by suicide—cursed you! M. de Mortagne, dying beneath the blow of an assassin, cursed you! For had you not married me to this man, M. Lugarto would not have pursued M. de Mortagne with his undying hatred."

"My God! my child, I am in despair! I am the most miserable of creatures."

"It is twenty years ago—upon that bed of agony whereon you now are lying—that you caused me to shed my first tears, caused me my first terrors, by cutting off the hair which my mother had touched and hallowed with her benediction. This day you see me compelled to accompany this man. The laws, and force, both condemn me to it. *To accompany him!* You understand all the horrors which that word comprises! Think of the ills that you have heaped upon me, from my childhood to this hour—think of all that can yet befall me, most horrible; and, if you hear it said hereafter, that I, your brother's daughter, have slain myself to escape infamy, let my blood be upon your head, as that of Ursula is—and be accursed!"

"Matilda! mercy, mercy! you terrify me," said Mademoiselle de Maran.

Ten o'clock struck, and the sound of a carriage with post horses, was heard, stopping in the street.

"Matilda! abandon me, if you will; but accompany not your husband—he is capable of anything."

"He is the husband you have chosen for me, madam! and the laws order that I should go with him," exclaimed Matilda.

Then, turning to M. de Lancry, she said to him, in a tone which, despite himself, made him shudder—

"Monsieur, I am ready."

M. de Lancry had expected a desperate resistance. He was astonished at the almost alarming quiet of Matilda's manner. Nevertheless, he rose, with a smile, and offered her his arm

Madame de Lancry repelled him, with a gesture full of dignity and contempt.

At this moment, Servien entered the room, and said to M. de Lancry—

"Monsieur le Vicomte, the carriage has come, and the gentlemen—they are waiting for you in the drawing-room."

"What gentlemen?"

"Three gentlemen who came in the berlin, from the hotel Meurice. Fritz, the courier, has gone on in advance, to order relays of horses."

"What the deuce does he mean by his three gentlemen?" said M. de Lancry, negligently.

At the moment when he was in the act of moving toward the door, a strong hand thrust Servien aside; and M. Secherin appeared in the opening, pale as a spectre!

He was dressed in the deepest mourning.

"My mother is dead! I have come to kill you!" cried M. Secherin in a voice of thunder.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A DUEL.

When he saw M. Secherin, M. de Lancry turned as pale as death "Very well—monsieur," he said in an altered voice, "we will meet by-and-by;" then, turning to Matilda; "Come," he said, "madam, come."

"You do not leave this house, except to fight with me!" cried M. Secherin, barring his exit with his person.

"M. Secherin, you are mad," said M. de Lancry, continuing to advance upon him

"Monsieur le Vicomte—one step more, and I slap you in the face before your wife."

Crime renders men cowardly. Gontran had once been brave; now he was only cruel.

"Servien," he said, "rid me of this man; let them turn him out of doors."

"Servien! Servien! I forbid you to touch him!" shrieked Mademoiselle de Maran. "This hateful Monsieur de Lancry wants to carry off my poor niece; this excellent Monsieur Secherin wants to kill him. He has all sorts of excellent reasons for doing so! For the love of God! let him do it, let him do it!"

Whether Servien had some old spite against M. de Lancry, or merely wished to make his mistress forget his impertinence in the early part of the evening; he withdrew quietly without uttering a word.

Matilda sunk into an arm-chair, and hid her face in her hands.

M. de Lancry, now furious, attempted to force his passage; M. Secherin, with a vigorous hand, seized him by the collar, and flung him violently back into the room.

M. de Lancry caught his foot in the carpet, and fell headlong. As he arose, he cast a rapid glance around him, to see if he could find anything that would serve him for a weapon. He found nothing.

This insult awoke in him, at length, some spark of his former courage;—his haggard face reddened slightly.

"You shall pay dearly for this brutality, clown that you are!"

"Clown, if you will; but I have come to kill you as soon as may be, and I shall kill you!"

"Well, then, the day after to-morrow—send me your seconds, they shall arrange it with mine—to-night and to-morrow do not belong to me."

"If it were light, I would drag you to the ground this instant—but—but I must wait until to-morrow morning. Happily the nights are short—my seconds, my arms are there! You shall not hence but to fight with me."

"Monsieur!" cried M. de Lancry, "this scene is disgraceful! before women."

"That is true;" said M. Secherin, who, standing immovably in the door of Mademoiselle de Maran's chamber, had held this wordy strife with Gontran; and, in less time than it requires to write it, he seized him by the collar, dragged him out, shut the door after him; and in an instant the two were standing in the first drawing-room, in the presence of M. Secherin's seconds.

This new outrage put the finishing stroke to M. de Lancry's fury. He rushed with his fists clenched, upon M. Secherin—the foam-flakes on his lip, and the fire in his eye.

"Do you, again, dare to lay hands on me?"

"Yes! viscount, and I will do more than that!" and with the words, M. Secherin seized the delicate wrists of M. de Lancry, in his strong, large hands, and shook them as if he would have broken them. Then bringing himself so close to the face of M. de Lancry, that the latter could feel his breath, he offered him the deadliest insult that one man can offer to another.

"Perhaps you will fight now!" he said.

M. de Lancry actually roared—roared terribly with rage and shame. M. Secherin hurled him back, placed himself between him and the door, snatched the cane from one of his seconds, and cried, shaking it at M. de Lancry. "If you make one step to leave this room, I will break you, as if you were upon the wheel, with blows!"

Gontran, seeing that it was impossible for him to contend in physical strength with M. Secherin—bit his very fists with rage.

"Men of honor!" he cried, looking toward the witnesses, in a voice choaked with fury. "Men of honor, accomplices to such a ruffian-like proceeding—such a premeditated plot!"

"It is an old debt—you should not have refused to fight him to-morrow," said a great bald man, one of whose cheeks was furrowed with a long deep scar, in a phlegmatic tone—"It is your own fault—you forced Secherin to employ hard measures. Long enough has he waited for the reparation of the wrong you have done him. He who owes—pays his debt, and is silent."

"But, seconds—monsieur—seconds. I must have time to get seconds," said Gontran.

"Your travelling carriage is below—we will go down and get into it together—inasmuch as you do not seem too *catholic* to me, although they tell me you have served. You have acquaintances here—we will find two of your friends come back and pick up Secherin here, and then to the road; at the first stage out of Paris, we will wait for daybreak. We shall easily find some corner of a lonely field, or some hollow way, which will suit our purpose."

"If not," said M. Secherin, who was stalking to and fro like a wolf in a cage, "I will not leave you for a second; and go whither you may, thither will I go;—thus will I care for you."

"One word more, monsieur," said M. de Lancry, quivering with rage, to the second of M. Secherin; "how did you learn that I was here?"

"That is not bad! Three days ago, the day but one after his mother's death, Secherin came and told me what was to do; and my comrade, Peter Leblanc, here, who, like me, has served in the 12th dragoons; we are neighbors of M. Secherin, in the country. We found that M. Secherin, was right—but to kill you, it was necessary to find you;—we set off from Rouvrai for Paris. As we passed near Maran, the idea came into M. Secherin's mind to call there for information, knowing that your wife was there. We found that you had just set off with Madame de Lancry: we followed on your track from stage to stage, till we reached Berny. There, very quietly, we waited for your return postilions; they told us that they had taken you to the hotel Meurice; we went to the hotel Meurice—you had gone out. Five or six times we came back—you were always out! tired of that sort of fun, we sat down to wait for you. At half-past nine o'clock, the master of the hotel said to us, 'Gentlemen, if it is absolutely necessary for you to see the Viscount de Lancry, his carriage is going to take him up in the *Faubourg St. Germain;* get into it—thus you will be sure to find him.' The advice was good; we took it, and here we are. This is enough to prove that there is ONE on high, who is not ill satisfied that worthy people should settle their account with ——. I will say the rest to your seconds, if I do not forget it, when I see you at work—you and M. Secherin."

During this narration, the rage of de Lancry was at its height; his infamous designs against Matilda might be frustrated. He had no longer any hope of escaping M. Secherin. He determined to fight him as soon as possible. Moreover, his courage had returned under the insults M. Secherin had heaped upon him—and there was still the chance of his killing M. Secherin.

Gontran had fought several duels with good fortune; he was a capital shot, and fenced admirably well. He addressed himself to the witness of his enemy, and said:

"Monsieur, I consent to everything. We will go and find two of my friends—only, I presume before going I can make my adieu to my wife," he added, with a sinister smile.

"Perhaps he means to escape by some secret staircase," said M. Secherin; "wherefore, Peter Leblanc, go and keep watch at the great gate."

M. de Lancry smothered his rage at this last insult, and rushed violently into Mademoiselle de Maran's bed-chamber.

"Well, madam!" he said to his wife, "now you are happy! now you are about to be a widow very soon—at least you hope so."

Matilda answered not a word.

"Yes! yes! we hope so! to be sure we hope so!" cried Mademoiselle de Maran. "Bravely am I about to put up prayers for this worthy M. Secherin."

After having gazed for some moments upon his wife, with an expression of ferocious hatred, M. de Lancry said to her, "It may be that I shall die, but I shall be avenged. *Lugarto remains for you.* He will find means to reach you, as he reached M. de Mortagne—as he reached Madame de Richeville—as he will reach M. de Rochegune, through you, and by you! But if I am not killed—oh! tremble! tremble! you shall be crushed!"

He left the room; those were his last words to Matilda. She, too, immediately left the hotel de Maran, in spite of the despairing supplications of her aunt, and went to await the issue of the duel, in the company of Madame de Richeville.

Two gentlemen of M. de Lancry's acquaintance, aroused in the middle of the night, and acquainted with the urgency and importance of the meeting, consented to serve as witnesses. They set off for Saint Denis. They waited there in an inn for the rising of the sun. At daybreak the duel took place in the ditch of the ancient fortification.

At M. Secherin's first shot M. de Lancry fell! he died, cursing Ursula, and accusing her as the cause of his death.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

CONCLUSION.

Madame de Lancry, informed of the event of the duel by a letter from one of the seconds, passed the first six months of her mourning in *Sacre Cœur*, with Madame de Richeville.

When he heard of the death of M. de Lancry, M. de Rochegune, as a matter of propriety, travelled for several months in Italy. Enlightened by the memoirs of Matilda, as to her sentiments toward him—as to the admirable sacrifice she had made—he nevertheless carried away with him a mixture of remorse, to cast a shadow over his brilliant hopes for a happy future. He still accused himself of the death of Emma.

Matilda discovered this sad mystery. Before her marriage, Emma had made a portrait of M. de Rochegune, from memory, and given it to him. At a later period, the portrait was given back to her by her husband, accompanied by the little portfolio which contained the miniature. Madame de Richeville had collected everything that remained to her of her daughter, with pious veneration; but never, since the death of Emma, had she had the courage to cast her eyes upon those sacred relics. One day she told Matilda to look among them for a medallion representing Emma when a child. In performing this request, Madame de Lancry opened the portfolio, containing the picture of M. de Rochegune, painted by Emma. She there found concealed two letters, one of which ran thus:

"*You are deceived; Matilda is your husband's mistress! You know the handwriting of M. de Rochegune; read this note, which an unknown friend sends to you.*"

" The second letter was the following, which is already known to the reader, having been written by M. de Rochegune to Madame de Lancry, when she requested him to return to Emma:

'I shall be in Paris in the course of to-morrow night. What you tell me is terrible; and, unluckily, I cannot repair the evil I have unintentionally done. Emma is an angel of goodness, of beauty, of candor, and of grace. She deserves a heart that belongs to her only. If I had never met you in my life—if it were possible for me to love any one but you—her love would have been to me the most precious treasure. But LOVE FOR PITY'S SAKE! is it worthy of her? is it worthy of myself? All my hopes turn upon the point, that you may be mistaken as to the danger of this unhappy child. In all events, I come. But her mother—our mother—our best friend—oh! I know not what fatality pursues me!'

Reflecting on the atrocious meaning which this letter was made to bear in the eyes of Emma—of the suspicions which it awakened in her mind—of the appearances thus misinterpreted—reflecting on the grief which this unhappy young woman had undergone, in discovering the secret of her birth—we shall easily understand how she was stricken by a mortal blow; and how, resigning herself to her mute despair, the miserable wretch would not communicate to a human being the last grief which was killing her! It was easily seen, from the creases almost cut through, and the worn-out state of the whole letter, that Emma had read and re-read it often, and had drunk in the fatal poison it contained, as it were, drop by drop.

Matilda, feeling, however, certain that she had this letter in her own possession, hunted for it, among her correspondence. She found it there, indeed; but on comparing the two copies carefully, she found that the note so villainously sent to Emma was a forgery. The writing of M. de Rochegune had been counterfeited with infernal skill.

This is the explanation of the fact. When Madame de Lancry persuaded M. de Rochegune to marry, she was living with her husband in the apartments of the *rue de Bourgogne*. The valet of Gontran, being in Lugarto's pay, (for he was at that time in Paris,) secretly obtained possession of the casket, by that scoundrel's orders, having forced the lock of Madame de Lancry's writing-desk, during her temporary absence. The rest is but too easily understood. Lugarto had a marvellous facility of counterfeiting all handwriting; and the opening of the casket, the key of which Madame de Lancry always carried about her person, was but the sport of a moment to him. In the certain foresight that M. de Rochegune's marriage would take place, the selection of that particular letter showed the work of a hand accustomed to work surely. At a later period, Madame de Lancry, having entertained some suspicions, the casket was confided to M. de Senneville; and thanks to that late precaution, others of Matilda's letters, scarcely less dangerous, escaped Lugarto.

After the discovery of this foul conspiracy, Matilda sent the two letters to M. de Rochegune. He then discovered the whole truth, and was thus delivered from the remorse which had so keenly afflicted him; he felt no longer aught save sad regrets and sincere pity, when thinking on all that Emma must have undergone during her slow agony.

Fifteen months after the death of her husband, Matilda married M. de Rochegune. It is useless to speak of the deep happiness, the holy rapture which hallowed that marriage. It is more easy to imagine, than to describe, the divine prospect of felicity which opened on Matilda, after the years of grief which she had so bravely, so religiously endured.

Nearly at the same time, a small lonely house, situated between Luzarches and the forest of Chantilly, was pulled down. This house had been for a long time uninhabited. In a hiding-place, not far from the chimney in the bed-chamber, precisely similar to that which Matilda had discovered, with so much terror, in the *rue de Bourgogne,* was found the skeleton of a man. That skeleton was all that remained of Lugarto. When M. de Lancry went to fetch his wife from the hotel de Maran, he had given his accomplice the rendezvous in that little house, to which he intended to convey Matilda, without giving her notice thereof.

Fritz, Gontran's courier, was to announce to Lugarto the arrival of his master and Matilda, by the crack of his whip, and was then to pass on to Chantilly, and there await the arrival of the carriage at the post-house, whither it would be sent to put up for the night. The duel with M. Secherin had upset all his schemes; but Fritz, knowing nothing about it, and believing that the berlin was behind him, ordered the relays, passed by the lonely house, gave the signal agreed upon, and hurried on toward Chantilly. Hearing the signal, Lugarto entered the hiding-place in the bed-chamber, supposing his host and hostess on the point of arriving, since his presence in that house, was not to be suspected by Matilda. It pleased Providence, that a spring within the panel would not work when Lugarto tried to leave his hiding-place. Tired at finding that Gontran did not arrive to set him free, he cried for help—but, alone, in that solitary house, his cries were useless. The next day the courier returned, and knocked at the door, but no one answered him. Already weary at the non-arrival of the carriage at Chantilly, he returned to Paris, and there learned the death of M. de Lancry.

As for Lugarto, his life had for some time past been so mysterious, that his disappearance seemed quite natural to the people he employed.

The horrible extent of the evil this man effected, can hardly be wondered at, when we look to the vast resources he found, both in almost universal bribery, and in the sort of secret police with which he surrounded every person whom he hated. To this atrocious wretch, saturated with all pleasures, wearied of them all by turns, crime had become both a necessity and a pleasure. Much money, some well concealed abodes in Paris, and his astonishing tact in counterfeiting all hand-writings, enabled him to strike mortal, or at least incurable blows at M. de Mortagne, Emma, Madame de Richeville, M. de Rochegune, and Matilda.

We will now turn our eyes away from the monstrous horrors which M. de Lancry and Lugarto had meditated for the future. When two such spirits hunt in couples, no consequences can be deemed surprising.

M. Secherin, after he had slain Gontran, travelled abroad, perpetually haunted by the memory of Ursula. The death of M. de Lancry had avenged, but it could not console him.

Mademoiselle de Maran, become entirely paralytic, and almost entirely blind, continued absolutely abandoned to the cruel despotism of Servien, who suffered no one to approach her. The latter part of her life was one continued series of incessant tortures. The sketch given of it above scarcely conveys a slight idea of its terrible reality. Had it not been for the resolute and immovable will of M. de Rochegune, Matilda would have endeavored to alleviate the painful position of her aunt; but he was inflexible.

Madame de Richeville gave herself up to the strictest and most gloomy austerities. Her health, long wasted by incurable sorrows, did not endure much longer. She learned, at last, the sublime self-sacrifice which Matilda made of her own happiness to Emma.

M. de Senneville caused the guilty levity of his pretences and falsehoods to be forgotten in the sincere and manly confession of his faults, and of the deep and devoted respect he ever showed to Matilda and M. de Rochegune.

To conclude—so that no one of the characters who have figured in this long narrative may be consigned to oblivion—we will state, that the widow Lebœuf returned to enthrone herself in state, within a few days after her disappearance, behind the counter of her cafè, in the rue St. Louis; and that she still retained her faithful Boitard as her waiter, and the brothers Godet as the most valuable of her habitual customers. M. de Lancry and Lugarto had given a large sum to the widow, to surrender her establishment to them for a few days, in order to their maintenance of their secret police.

The neighbourhood of the hotel d'Orbesson, occupied by M. de Rochegune, rendered their surveillance continually necessary, in case, driven to despair by extremities, Matilda might have thought of seeking for a refuge there.

Madame Lebœuf delighted herself by enveloping her brief absence in a veil of the densest mystery. That mystery continues, up to this very hour, the inexhaustible topic of conversation among the brothers Godet, and the other guests of the café Lebœuf. Last of all, after the departure of Colonel Ulric, the old hotel was changed into a manufactory of chemical productions.

THE END.